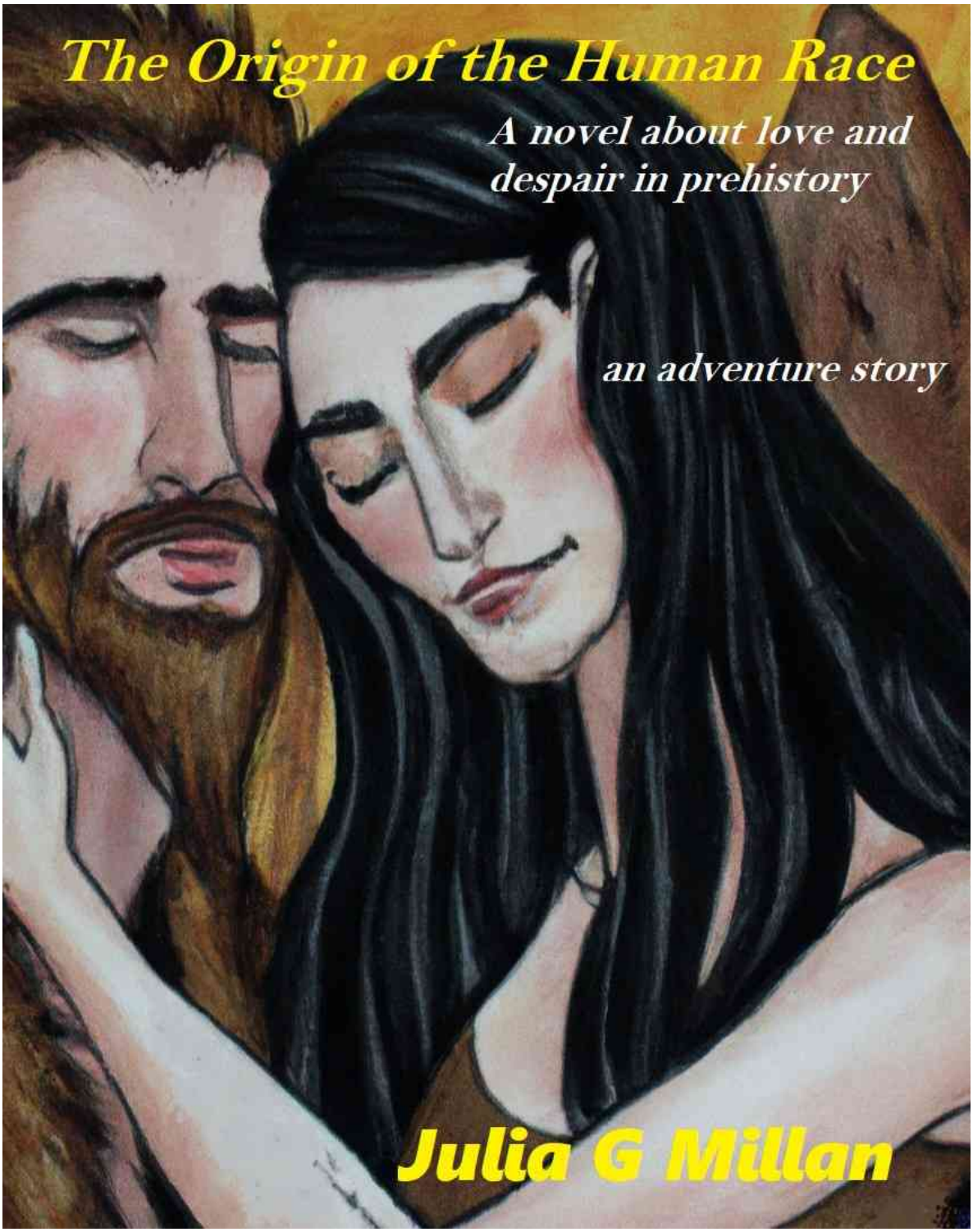
The Origin of the Human Race

A novel about love and despair in Prehistory

—an adventure story—



When love is stronger than desire, wonderful things happen

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Preface

Many thousand years ago, Humanity was at a crossroad that threatened its very existence and whose resolution would mark a turning point in history. In an environment of barbarism and cruelty where women were treated as commodities and surviving the next day was an achievement, there was also room for feelings and love.

In a world full of brutality and doomed to extinction, a couple of teenagers will have in their hands the future of Humanity. They will be forced to make a momentous decision that will change their lives and those of their descendants forever.

Part One

Sighting

The tribe moved slowly, forming a row across the steppe. The chief, always at the front, walked with his eyes fixed on the horizon, carrying his weapons: two acacia wood spears with flint tips bound with hemp fibres, another two made of yew wood, two sharp knives crafted from buffalo ribs, and a pair of hand axes also made of flint.

The man immediately behind him marched at a short distance, carrying similar gear and dragging a heavy bundle of hides with some belongings. Beyond them, three women walked in single file, though close together. All three held babies in one arm, while with the other hand they held onto other children. Following them were two young women without children, and the emaciated procession was closed by three men, two of whom were engaged in conversation.

There could be a distance of about one hundred steps between the chief and the last individual. The midday sun beat down mercilessly on their heads, causing them to take off their hides and tie them around their waists. All individuals were marching naked except for their loincloths; even the women, save one that remained dressed despite the heat.

Vultures circled above in silence, sensing the tribe's imminent demise. Only the cries of the children seemed to disturb the stillness of the summer afternoon.

However, they were not alone. Up there, on the pinnacle of the rocky spire shaped by the wind over ages, two other men watched them closely.

"It's Samman. I have no doubt," one of them said, while the other nodded.

"Why have they returned?" the latter asked.

"They found no game, Tabal. The southern lands must be even dryer."

The two fell silent for a moment and continued observing.

"Why are they so scattered? If wild beasts attacked them, they'd be lost."

"They're exhausted," replied Unnum. "They don't care anymore. Better to die quickly than be devoured by hunger and thirst."

The boy watched the tribe's slow and listless walk, and the bowed heads confirmed what the leader had said. He added, "I don't think they'll make it to the next moon if they don't find water."

"Uh-huh," he nodded. "But they'll find it! They're heading straight for our well. Let's go!"

"Where to?"

"To kill that bastard once and for all."

"Why, Unnum? You could make peace with him. The more men we have, the better chance we have to survive. Wouldn't it be better to merge with them?"

"Come on!" the chief insisted, and Tabal had no choice but to comply.

The two ran towards the rest of the tribe, and the young boy, more sensible than his leader, couldn't help but think about the mistake it would be to fight those men. Not

because of the risk of defeat, as they outnumbered them, but because it was more advantageous to increase the tribe's numbers at a time when they had already lost many members. The larger the clan, the greater the chances of survival in a world teeming with wild beasts, and also the better and more effective ways to corner prey.

But no, Unnum couldn't forgive his brother for that offense, and now he saw the perfect opportunity to settle the score. Tabal kept running, but he couldn't stop looking around. Now they were crossing a small acacia forest, the same one they had passed through when they reached that summit. Tigers with sabre-toothed teeth often lurked in those places, and his hunter instinct told him there might be one around. Venturing there alone was a reckless move, and it made him think again about the wisdom of merging with those people. When beasts attacked, if there was no fire, it was best to stick together like a tight group, with children in the centre well-covered, and pound the ground and scream loudly to make the animal think they were a single individual and believe it couldn't succeed in an attack. It was a strategy that almost invariably worked, even against multiple attackers. All they had to do was stay united until they reached a high place or a cave.

Fortunately, they encountered no tigers, although Tabal could hear the growl of a bear in the distance.

On the other hand, it wasn't a good time to start a war, with all the tribe members camped at that oasis. The usual practice would have been for women and children to stay in the cave to be safe from beasts while the men fought.

Actually, it was the norm during hunting expeditions. They would set out before sunrise to track prey, attempting to corner them. If the prey escaped, they would relentlessly pursue them until the exhausted animals could be killed.

Tabal thought it was fortunate that Baloc, the main god of the skies, had endowed men with endurance in running. Herbivores were faster, but they tired out sooner. Chasing a deer or a gazelle for a thousand steps yielded no results, but the animal had to stop to rest after that time. Meanwhile, the men regained the advantage until, getting closer, the creature resumed the race and took another lead. And so, with perseverance, the prey had to stop to rest more often, and the men closed in more and more until the animal couldn't take a single step and collapsed on the ground, victim of a heart attack. The pursuit could last a whole morning or sometimes even the entire day. But Tabal didn't mind running. He was usually the one leading the races and delivering the lethal spear thrust to the prey's neck if it was still alive. The worst part was dragging it back to the cave for the rest of the tribe to eat. That was the most tedious part of his job, and the reason why tribes should be larger.

When he was a child, his tribe had a lot of people. Women and their children, along with a small contingent of warriors, followed the hunters and joined them to eat the prey where it was hunted. It didn't matter if they arrived the next day. The meat was waiting for everyone.

But now, they were going through a tough time due to the scarcity of men. Everyone had to follow the prey because all were needed to encircle and corner the animals. This left women and children vulnerable, forced to stay in the caves, safe from wild beasts.

As if that wasn't enough, the drought had lasted too long, and prey was scarce. Hunting expeditions were becoming longer, and women and children had to subsist in the meantime with the meagre fruits they gathered here and there until the men returned with fresh meat.

What was once Calam's numerous tribe, the father of Unnum and Samman, had dwindled to less than half due to hunger and, let's say it, the relentless wars the brothers waged against each other.

Tabal was now going to fight against those who were once members of his own tribe, and not only was he going to do it against his will, but he was also going against common sense and logic, driven only by old family feuds long forgotten by time.

But he had no choice. In that distant era, life and death accompanied both men and women at all times, and no one was sure if they would see the next sunrise. To fight or die, to survive or perish, that was the daily dilemma faced by humanity, with the sole purpose of making it through to the next day.

The war

They hadn't even taken two sips of water when they were ambushed. Two of the men died instantly as their skulls were struck at the nape of their necks with axes wielded by the men who caught them from behind. The other two and the chief reacted in time and dodged the blows, although one of them also died before reaching his weapons. When Samman and his lieutenant grabbed theirs, Unnum understood that the war had been won, although the final battle wouldn't be easy. His brother was a massive man who easily disposed of the two warriors holding him, ready to smash his brother's face with his axe. However, Unnum was agile, and with a feint, he managed to sidestep and trip him. But he couldn't thrust his spear as he intended. The lieutenant repelled his attack and brandished his own against the five men besieging them, allowing his chief to get up. A life-or-death fight ensued, injuring some of Unnum's men, Tabal among them. But Samman and his companion couldn't do anything against the numerical superiority of their opponents. After killing the last of their companions, they cornered the chief and separated him so Unnum could kill him at will.

"This is only between you and me, brother," the massive man said desperately. "Can't you face me alone?"

The two stared at each other, and Unnum signalled to his men. They withdrew, leaving the two brothers alone in the fray. As soon as they were released, Samman grabbed a spear and his axe quickly enough to prevent his brother from striking him first, something he was close to doing.

But Unnum reacted in time, and now the two stood face to face, deciding who would attack first. Both wore simple loincloths, their hair tied back with cords forming a kind of bun. Even though Samman was older, his dark and full beard still didn't show the incipient grey that was beginning to appear in his brother's.

Unnum's tense muscles glistened with a shiny sweat as he held his spear, and his eyes were sparkling with determination. Equally fierce, Samman made several feints with his axe raised, ready to attack. The air vibrated with energy, loaded with tension, as the two warriors studied each other, seeking any weakness. The rest of the men maintained a sepulchral silence, only broken by the cries of women and children watching the scene from behind the trees.

They had faced each other in the past with uneven results, and they knew each other's fighting styles. But several years had passed since then, and the fact that they were still alive showed they had learned new techniques.

Finally, the silence was shattered by the thunderous clash of spears when Unnum attempted an attack. The two men pushed each other, fighting for control over the rough and dusty terrain. Samman's spear buzzed dangerously close to Unnum's face, but he skillfully dodged in time. His opponent now only had his axe, which was his best weapon.

The fight turned into a wild dance, with Samman and Unnum spinning and dodging, attacking and defending in a deadly choreography. The sound of weapons clashing echoed like thunder as the two men fought for survival. Muscles tensed, eyes gleamed with fierceness, and sweat and dust mingled on their bodies.

Unnum thrust and thrust with his spear, but he couldn't land a hit, until he lost it, shattered by Samman's axe. Now they were evenly matched in weaponry, and the dance began again.

But with a skilled move, Samman managed to disarm Unnum of his axe, sending it flying through the air before it crashed to the ground with a dull thud. Unnum stepped back momentarily, surprised by his opponent's skill, and stumbled and fell to the ground. Then Samman didn't hesitate for a moment. He lunged at him and raised the piece of wood and flint to strike his brother's face... when suddenly, he stopped, arching his figure backward and letting the weapon fall to the ground. His figure froze as if paralysed, and he twisted his mouth, only able to turn slowly. He turned, and the last words of his life were, "You, damn witch!"

Behind him stood a thin, toothless old woman, dressed in the filthy remnants of a black bear's hide. The woman had just plunged an extremely sharp bone knife into his kidney.

"You, wretch bastard!" the old woman shouted, spitting. "You won't steal women from anyone anymore."

Ulla, the old woman and the tribe's sorceress, smiled as the man collapsed on the ground with a choked sigh.

Next, the men helped Unnum to his feet, and he breathed a sigh of relief. He had seen death up close, reflected in his brother's eyes, and it certainly took time for him to compose himself. For a moment, he continued with a heaving chest and sparkling eyes until the women started emerging from the trees and approached the remaining warriors.

The distribution

Right after the battle, Ulla took care in treating the wounds of those who had fought. Tabal had a bruise on his collarbone from a blow with the blunt edge of an axe, fortunately not breaking the bone. The sorceress diligently applied herbal poultices to the bleeding wounds of the others and performed some spells and rituals on the more serious injuries. Fortunately for them, no man from the tribe died, which was quite uncommon, probably due to the extreme hunger and desperation of their adversaries.

But Unnum's tribe wasn't much better, and the old woman scolded the men for not leaving any of Samman's clan warriors alive. If they had, they could have eaten one after the appropriate rituals, at the moonrise. However, these rituals had to be performed when the body was still alive, and therefore, they had no choice but to bury them to prevent the place from being overrun by wild animals. The beasts didn't care about eating unblessed meat.

Next was the distribution of the captured women. During the battle, these women had been guarded by the native females of the winning tribe, who had proceeded to strip them completely and gather the belongings of the defeated people. Ladda, the chief's favourite, spoke up and diligently reported the inventory of confiscated materials:

"Six gazelle hides, three deer hides, and two bison hides. A sack of rotten fruit, five bone knives, two dull shards, and three sharp ones, two mortars, and a bladder of honey."

"Is that all?" asked the chief, who had already recovered.

"That's all. And of poor quality. The hides barely have fur, and the honey is rancid."

"Very well. Anything else?"

At that moment, Shiba, another female from the winning clan, appeared. She approached the chief and showed him a little bag containing bones.

"These are relics," she said. "One of the women told me they belong to her ancestors."

"To the pyre with it!" Ulla exclaimed.

"No!" shouted the woman. "Please, no! By the gods, don't do it!"

But the sorceress ignored the pleas. She snatched the bag from Shiba's hands and tossed it into the newly kindled fire. The owner of the bones started to cry and moan and advanced toward the flames, trying to retrieve them, but it was already too late. The rabbit fur sack immediately caught fire, and two men had to forcibly take her away to prevent her from burning.

"My parents! My brothers! My dead children!" she shouted, inconsolable, while some women tried to comfort her. "Now they'll be gone forever!"

A cry of pain escaped her throat, and she clung tightly to her children, who were already by her side. They were a couple of little ones, about four or five years old.

After that, Unnum and the other warriors began to inspect the captured women. The chief didn't find any of the ones he knew, the ones his brother had taken when they separated. Ulla, the sorceress, as if reading his mind, said:

“Someone must have taken them, just like he did with ours.”

Before them stood four women and an equal number of children, along with two babies who wouldn’t stop crying. Four women, two of whom were teenagers and two were mothers, or rather, five, including the one with the relics, who remained kneeling by the fire, watching as the last remains of her ancestors burned.

They all looked miserable: emaciated, dishevelled, with greasy and matted hair. A similar appearance to their men, who were now dead.

However, there was something about them, something that tried to rise above everything, above the ragged and tattered appearance: a strong and determined will to survive, a deep and intense desire to move forward.

The four standing women stared fixedly at their new masters. The men didn’t differ much from their own, as they all had a similar appearance: dishevelled, dirty, and with a fierce gaze. Their women, on the other hand, presented better than themselves; they were slightly less gaunt and maintained a haughty expression, looking at them suspiciously.

The truth was, they all looked frightening, and the cries of the newly captured women’s children accused them of that fear, especially the babies, who couldn’t stop whimpering. One of them managed to calm down a bit when his emaciated mother, the worst of them all, offered him a breast from which the poor child could barely extract any milk.

“That won’t do anymore,” said Ulla. “We’ll eat her, and the child will be sacrificed to the gods.”

The woman in question was clearly sick, but upon hearing that, she summoned strength and began screaming wildly, completely hysterical. The sorceress slapped her hard to make her shut up, but it was in vain. They then tried to snatch the child from her arms, but the woman threw herself to the ground, holding the baby tightly. She only calmed down a bit and handed over the child when Masha, another woman from the chief’s group, offered her own milk-dripping breasts to feed the baby.

With the attention diverted from the poor wretch, Ator, one of the warriors who had fought, shouted, “I want that one!” He stepped forward, pointing at a teenager trying to hide behind another woman, who seemed to be the mother. “She’s mine!” he yelled again.

Ladda, the chief’s favourite, pulled the girl from where she was hiding and placed her in front of everyone to be seen. Meanwhile, the mother had tried to stop it, but another tribe woman hit her in the face, forcing her to stay still under the threat of a knife.

The girl stood in front of everyone. She was very different from what those humans had seen before. She had a narrow nose, large and slanted eyes, slightly pale skin... but what stood out the most were her breasts: two large breasts that the poor girl tried to hide behind her arms. Breasts much larger than those of any ordinary woman, whose breasts were usually no bigger than those of other mammals. In fact, no more is needed to nurture offspring.

This was the girl who, during the sighting, had covered her chest. Tabal now understood the reason: she probably didn't want to arouse the desires of the other men in her tribe.

Ulla, the sorceress, stepped forward to observe her closely. In her long life, she had met many women suffering from obesity, but this girl was thin, as befitting those who were constantly on the move. The old woman approached even closer and squeezed one of her nipples without any milk coming out.

"Aren't you a mother?" she asked, surprised. "Then why are your breasts so swollen?"

The young girl didn't respond and continued trying to cover her breasts.

"Spread your legs," Ulla ordered.

But the girl remained unmoved.

"Spread your legs!" she shouted, giving her a hard slap that burst her lip. The girl started crying and slightly parted her thighs, just enough for Ulla to examine her vagina.

The sorceress inserted a couple of fingers and proceeded to conduct a crude examination that caused great discomfort to the young woman. After finishing it, she proclaimed:

"She's a virgin!" she exclaimed in amazement, turning to the others.

Before anyone could react, the guy who had claimed her earlier insisted again:

"It's mine! I'm keeping her."

He then approached and grabbed her hand, trying to pull her away forcefully. However, not everyone agreed, and Unnum stopped him. He crossed paths with him and grabbed his arm, forcing him to let go of the girl's hand.

"She will be mine. It's my right by conquest."

"No!" the other roared.

"I'm the leader, Ator!"

"You owe me, Unnum! We agreed that I would choose first next time!"

"You'll get the mother," he offered in exchange.

After a quick glance at the mentioned woman, the man locked eyes with the chief, and the two stared at each other intensely. Or rather, Ator's only eye, as he was one-eyed, fixed his gaze on Unnum's, and for a few seconds, tension filled the air. Both men were equally burly and filled with muscles that could erupt at any moment. However, all the warriors went on guard, and Ator realized that, in case of a dispute, they would support the leader.

"The mother?" He seemed to resign.

"Yes, the mother!" insisted Unnum, with eyes as cold as ice. "That one!" he pointed towards the woman the girl seemed to be bonding with, although they looked nothing alike.

Ator contemplated the alternative ‘trophy’ assigned to him and returned a frigid look to the chief, who endured it for a moment. Finally, the warrior pointed to the other recently captured teenager and said:

“And that one?”

“She’s mine too.”

“What?” The one-eyed man was about to boil over, and Unnum realized he might have gone too far. But he couldn’t back down now to avoid showing weakness. He then looked back at the group of captured women and children and noticed there was still another woman to distribute besides the sick one. It was the one with the relics, undoubtedly the worst ‘of the package’, and theoretically, it should belong to Cadfe, another prominent warrior. But Cadfe was more docile than Ator, and Unnum finally opted for a compromise:

“If you want another woman in addition to the one you got, dispute that one —he pointed towards the unattractive female—, with your comrades.”

Another tense silence ensued, with the unfaltering chief moving his axe slightly up and down. Finally, Ator spat at the side, grabbed the mother of the teenager by one arm, and the woman followed her new husband resignedly towards a group of bushes beyond.

Once the distribution was completed, the captured women put back on their ragged hides and the tribe distributed their belongings among the members of the victorious clan. Then, the tribe shared the meagre food they had with the newcomers and their children, and after gathering enough water, the resulting tribe from that merger began its journey northward.

The two teenagers walked in the middle of everyone, in case one of them dared to escape. Meanwhile, the other three women and their children were barely watched. They had enough trouble dragging their crying offspring. Certainly, none of them would entertain the idea of running away. The chances of surviving alone in that hostile world were practically nil.

It wasn’t yet dark when suddenly two tremendous lightning bolts pierced the celestial vault, striking two distant mountains.

“Again?” exclaimed one of the women, before a bright light illuminated the sky as if it were noon.

“The gods are angry,” muttered the sorceress, who stopped and began to feel agitation in her chest that almost caused convulsions. “Oh, Baloc!” she knelt. “Fill the sky with clouds if it is your desire...! But don’t kill us!”

“Get up, old woman!” Unnum kicked her. “We need to quicken the pace if we want to arrive before nightfall.”

And finally, they arrived. As night fell, they reached a system of caves nestled on the slope of a mountain, and some men started a fire at the entrance to prevent beasts from entering. It was a vast space they had recently discovered, divided into various ‘rooms’ scattered at different heights, some quite distant from each other. A karst

massif that water had carved over the ages and that could accommodate several tribes. In fact, when they discovered it, they found the remains of many fires and animal bones, an unmistakable sign that it had been used by other people in the past, even in the distant past.

On the way, the sick woman had already died, and their rituals prohibited them from eating the dead if they hadn't been sacrificed previously. Masha, the woman who offered her breasts, took care of her baby, as the other mothers in their tribe could barely support their own.

After dinner with some berries, the sorceress invoked the gods, and the women and some men danced around the main bonfire. Then, since the girl with the large breasts was a virgin, the old woman had to perform a certain ritual before Unnum lie with her, something he had been longing for a while. But Ulla didn't react. After the dances, the sorceress lay on the ground with blank eyes and foaming at the mouth. Impatient to consummate 'his love', the chief grabbed the girl and dragged her to a corner of the cave, while she tried to resist, unsuccessfully. But at that moment, the old woman woke up.

"No!" she shouted. "You can't lie with her!"

Ulla sprung forward like a coil and hurriedly snatched the young girl from the man's clutches.

"What are you saying, cursed witch?" Unnum roared and pushed her away with a swipe of his hand.

"You can't do it!" she persisted. "I've just had a vision. The gods have revealed to me that great disasters will befall us if you do it. The thunder, the lightning... What we've seen so far is just a warning, and the next time, it will strike directly at our heads."

"Alright, old woman. What does that have to do with me?"

"The young woman must die a virgin," she said, solemnly.

"What?"

"To prevent calamity."

"What calamity?"

"She must be sacrificed on the next full moon, or else, we'll all perish."

"No!" roared the chief. "She will be mine right now!"

Unnum dismissed the sorceress and grabbed the girl again, starting to move towards his 'quarters'. But at that moment, Ator, still resentful, stood in his way, and this time he didn't hesitate to grab him fiercely by his hide.

"Haven't you heard what the witch said?"

The one-eyed man looked at him threateningly with his lone eye, knowing that this time he was right.

"Respect our gods, Unnum!" said another member of the tribe.

"Yes, respect them!" shouted another.

Even Ladda, his favourite, didn't take long to make herself heard:

"Do you want all our children to die?"

The chief looked at everyone with a serious expression, and then, being aware that the whole tribe was against him, he seemed to resign. Ulla approached him again and whispered:

"Settle for the other girl. She's also part of your today's loot."

Unnum considered the decision and nodded. The other teenager wasn't as spectacular, but she had been friendly during the journey from the oasis to the caves. It was clear that she wanted to please him and was an intelligent woman. If she managed to become the new favourite of the chief, she would certainly live well.

"Alright," he agreed. "She will be sacrificed on the next full moon to appease the gods. You," he pointed at Tabal, the man he trusted the most, "take care of her until then. You'll vouch for her virginity with your life."

The young man stepped forward and took the girl by the hand, intending to bring her near the fire, as she seemed visibly chilled. She looked at him suspiciously, but he tried to reassure her with an affectionate smile.

Before long, everyone went to sleep. Unnum unleashed his primal instincts with his new wife, while Ator did the same with Kara, the woman assigned to him, who was the mother of the virgin girl. Despite being older, she must have been quite an expert in the art of love, as the one-eyed man engaged in the act again despite being tired from the fight and the long journey. Furthermore, he relinquished the other woman he was supposed to contend for with Cadfe, who welcomed her with open arms, as he had none at the moment, as his previous wife had been murdered by another rival wife, who died later during childbirth.

Meanwhile, Tabal went with the girl with the large breasts to the corner where he usually slept. There, they settled in and prepared to spend the night. However, the girl, understandably shocked by her death sentence, couldn't stop crying and shivering at the same time.

And for good reason. The place in question was a secluded spot in that conglomerate of chambers, very close to the end of the cave, and it had some dampness. Tabal felt pity for the young girl and offered her one of his hides, as the one she was wearing was quite worn out and small.

She looked at him surprised, and he smiled, proceeding to show her the best way to place that thick megaloceros hide, the best one he had. Eventually, they fell asleep and spent the night, although Tabal's sleep, like hers, was quite light.

Hunting

The sky was in a state of transition, shifting from the darkness of the night to the gentle glow of dawn. Stars still twinkled in the sky, but the first rays of light were beginning to illuminate the horizon. The firmament was tinged with soft shades of pink, orange, and purple.

As the morning light intensified, the effects of the drought became increasingly visible: dry and withered vegetation stretched as far as the eye could see, with exhausted tall grass and scattered trees that had lost much of their leaves. The ground was cracked and dusty due to the lack of rain, and the puddles had dried up, reduced to mud at best.

Only a few oases remained here and there in what had once been lush forests full of life. Tough times had befallen the people in that distant era. Despite everything, the silent and desolate nature welcomed the tribe.

The morning rose cold and dry, and Unnum's clan headed back to the oasis. There, they hoped to catch some animals approaching to drink, something they couldn't do the previous night, a more opportune moment, as they spotted some sabre-toothed tigers prowling the area. On the way, the animosity of Ator and Unnum's women towards the newcomers was evident, foreshadowing tough times for their children and good times for the new wives. At least for as long as the novelty lasted.

But throughout the day, they barely managed to catch anything. They only got a few small prey, and as night approached, they prepared for dinner.

The tribe scattered around the small pond. In its day, it must have been a significant water reserve, but it was diminishing, and in some areas, mud was all that was left.

Tabal got only a piece of meat and a few berries, which he eagerly started to devour. However, his captive companion looked at the steak with eyes reflecting infinite sadness, and before taking a bite, she asked:

"How long has it been since you last had meat?"

She sighed and said:

"I don't even remember," she said, looking down.

The boy felt sorry for her. What must have been a beautiful black mane was now ragged and torn, hiding almost all of her lovely face. He, on the other hand, had a clear forehead and brown hair pulled back. Despite also being a teenager, his body was fully developed and indistinguishable from the other men.

Tabal reached out and tried to gather the strands covering the girl's face, making her look at him. He, in turn, gave her an innocent and affectionate gaze, offering her his food with eyes full of tenderness:

"Eat the berries too. I think you need them more than I do."

And rightfully so. From the scarce food the tribe had, the girl had barely received anything the previous day, and she must have been without a proper meal for quite some time.

“Hey, what’s your name? We’ve been together all day, and I still don’t know your name.”

“Umma,” she replied while devouring the plate.

“Does the wound hurt?” he asked, noticing she winced every time she opened her mouth. Although it was healing, the slap Ulla gave her on the lip still left it somewhat bruised.

The girl simply shook her head, continuing to eat. Tabal let her finish, and when she did, he asked:

“What were you doing with Samman? When did they capture you?”

“His tribe raided mine three seasons ago.”

“Three seasons?”

“Yes, three rainy seasons. In the territory where I come from, we measured time by the snow. But here, apparently, there’s a dry season and a rainy season.”

Umma spoke Tabal’s language quite correctly, although with a strong foreign accent. It was evident that she had acquired the language in the three years she had been with Samman, Unnum’s brother now dead. The girl still had a sad expression, but she was gradually opening up to her guardian. In fact, Tabal wasn’t with her to prevent her from escaping. It was something that no one in their right mind would dare to do, as a lone woman in that hostile environment would be devoured by wild animals in a matter of hours, or at most, days. In fact, the boy’s mission was to prevent other men from approaching her.

“I am sixteen rainy seasons old,” the boy asserted. “I’ve never been to snowy territories, except those in the mountains. Well, rainy seasons... it’s a saying. It rains less and less. In this season, it hasn’t rained at all. How many do you have?”

“I am also sixteen.”

“Sixteen seasons...,” the boy raised his eyebrows. “And you’re still a virgin... How is that possible?”

The young girl sighed and then said:

“When Samman raided my tribe, I was still not a woman, but then my breasts grew quickly. That was interpreted as a sign.”

“A sign?”

“Yes. When I became a woman, Samman gave up taking me as his wife because the gods revealed to him in dreams that if he did, they wouldn’t favour him.”

“I see. By making that sacrifice, he would gain their favour.”

“Exactly. Our sorceress confirmed it. I was... like a talisman.”

Tabal remembered that Samman was very superstitious. In fact, it was a surprise to everyone that Ulla, the sorceress, sided with Unnum, who was less docile, instead of his brother.

“Well, it doesn’t seem like your gods have been very favourable lately.”

“The drought is bad for everyone, and for us, it’s worse. In the south, it didn’t rain much in the previous season either. That’s why two warriors were planning to kill Samman and take me as a wife. I believe that if you hadn’t appeared, I would no longer be a virgin.”

“Wow... but if you’re from the north, why did you come so far south?”

“Too cold,” she answered. “The herds came here, and we followed.”

“I see... Well, now they’re heading back north. We’re going to start moving that way. We’ll have to stock up on good hides before we get there.”

Umma remembered the gesture from the previous night and thanked him:

“Your hide comforted me. Did you feel cold yesterday?”

“Yes. But I’m used to it.”

She looked at him and smiled affectionately. Then she said:

“You sleep alone... Don’t you have a woman to keep you warm?”

“I’ve never had a woman. I would if I excelled in war, but I’ve never killed anyone.”

“What is your trade?”

“I’m a hunter. Well, you know... In a tribe, we all have to do everything. When it’s time to hunt, we all hunt, even the warriors. And when it’s time to fight, well, we all fight.”

At that moment, some women began to gather branches to stoke the fire. Umma asked:

“Aren’t we going to the caves?”

“Not tonight. We’ll stay here. We’re going to try to hunt some prey that comes to drink at the well. Yesterday, we had to leave because of the tigers.”

“Are there none now?”

“We think not. From the tracks, they must have moved north. We’ll be less cold here,” Tabal continued. “Of course, my megaloceros hide is still yours.”

She smiled again, and at that moment, Kara, the woman who seemed to be her mother, passed by with her children at her side. Umma exchanged some words in her language with her, and when she left to be with Ator, Tabal asked:

“Are you really Kara’s daughter? You don’t look much alike,” he observed, and it was true. Kara was an ordinary woman, with barely any breasts, like all the others. Her face was friendly, with a narrow shape; she had large and expressive eyes and wide hips, undoubtedly a result of numerous childbirths.

“She is not my mother,” Umma responded. “My mother died when I was born. Kara is my wet nurse. She raised me, and I am like her daughter. Her eldest daughter.”

The sunset gave way to a navy blue sky, and some stars were already visible as points of light in the east. The tribe members lay down to begin sleeping, and Umma asked:

“Aren’t you sleeping?”

“Tonight, we have to hunt. As soon as it gets completely dark, we’ll have to leave.”

“Do I go too?”

“Yes, you’ll accompany me during the watch. Unnum doesn’t want to lose sight of you for a moment. He doesn’t trust the men, who can’t stop looking at you.”

“Yeah, I have already noticed it.”

“But don’t worry about the hunting; it’ll be easy. It’s a matter of staying completely still and silent so that the animals think they are alone. When they are drinking, they’ll be ours.”

The camp was at some distance from the well. The women would stay there with the children, next to the fire, while the hunters would head towards the water. As they set out, Umma asked:

“Why does Ator stay with the women?”

“Ha-ha,” he smiled. “It is said that your mother keeps him ‘very satisfied’.”

“Is that why?”

“No, just kidding. He doesn’t see well at night. Since he only has one eye...”

“I see. I understand. Why did he lose it?”

“A wild horse kicked him in the head. Those were the good times, when it rained. We spotted a herd and scared them with fire to lead them toward a cliff. You know, they go wild, and then they don’t have time to stop and avoid falling. Ator was with other men, blocking a passage, so they couldn’t escape that way. One reared up. And...,” Tabal shuddered, remembering the scene, “well, it gave him a good kick in the face. Losing an eye was the least of his worries. That man is very tough.”

“Yes, he really seems like it. Kara told me this morning that he alone killed a bear, and that’s why he has such a good black hide.”

“Ha-ha, that’s a lie. We found the bear dead inside a cave.”

The girl chuckled, and he was glad she had a good spirit, considering what awaited her.

“Hey, Umma, aren’t you afraid of death?”

“I am immortal, Tabal.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes. I won’t die on the full moon. I’m sure of that.”

The boy looked at her incredulously, but she didn’t seem to be joking. Umma continued:

“The sorceress of my tribe predicted that I would never die. She was a very wise woman who had many premonitions. They all came true.”

“How can that be possible? I mean, not being able to die.”

“I don’t know. The god is also immortal, isn’t he?”

“Well, yes, but gods are gods... and we’re just humans. Do you worship Baloc?”

“Our sorceress spoke of a single God.”

“Baloc, I suppose.”

The girl shrugged. “I don’t know. Who is Baloc?”

“He’s the god of our tribe, although there are many more. Didn’t Samman tell you about him?”

“Only sorceresses talk about gods, and we already had ours.”

“What happened to her?”

“She left us last month. He drank stagnant water. His belly swelled, and he died.”

“Damn drought,” lamented Tabal. “Baloc is holding the water in the sky and denying it to us. He must be furious because strange things have been happening for the past three days.”

“What things? Those strange lightning and flashes?”

Tabal nodded.

“Yes. They happen several times a day without a single cloud in the sky. And not just that. Some women have reported very strange things. Some of them had bleeding, like their monthly cycle, when it wasn’t their time, and it disappeared before reaching the ground.”

Umma raised her eyebrows.

“Well, we’ve arrived,” the boy warned. “Now lie down and don’t move. I’ll position myself behind that tree,” he pointed to a yew tree and crouched down next to it.

The girl obeyed and lay down, quickly falling asleep. The tree was next to a narrow corridor through which herbivores had to pass to drink, and other men positioned themselves in similar spots.

The night passed without a single quadruped appearing. Gazelles, deer, and even a megaloceros were expected, but the first half passed without any sign of them. It seemed that very few remained in that territory, as they had all gone north.

Tabal looked up at the sky and marvelled at the multitude of stars filling the firmament. The crescent moon hid momentarily when herds of clouds veiled its intense silver light. It was a sky very similar to that other night, four seasons ago. Only this time it wasn’t as late, and in fact, the purple hues of sunset were still visible on the horizon.

The tribe, always hungry, had found a herd of horses grazing in a cane thicket at the bottom of a valley. There were at least thirty or forty of them, and the tribe leaders, Unnum and Samman —when the brothers still got along— debated how to carry out the operation. The latter advocated for silently advancing through the grass and throwing their spears when they were within range. However, his brother believed there was a high risk of the animals realising it and fleeing before they got close enough.

Unnum preferred a fire-driven encirclement tactic because Fortune had arranged for the animals to be relatively close to a large cliff, an immense abyss. If they could drive them over, the tribe could satisfy its hunger with the finest-quality meat.

The matter seemed quite simple, and in the end, they agreed to split into two groups, including women. Every resource was useful to block all exits and make the animals run toward the only place where no one was, namely, the abyss.

Samman would lead the group, preventing the horses from escaping through the right gorge, and Unnum would do the same on the left. The valley's bottom had a natural plug formed by the mountains, and there, the animals couldn't escape. Among other things, the tribe had set fire to the grass covering the slopes.

With the fire already started, the men who ignited it ran towards the animals with torches held high, shouting at the top of their lungs. As expected, the herbivores got scared and started running in all directions.

The stampede was divided into three sections. One went towards Samman, where they managed to turn the horses and join the second, running towards the cliff. The third section, however, stubbornly insisted on trying to escape, and a good number of animals rushed into Unnum's area, where a dozen people, including men, women, and even children, tried everything to drive them back using the fire. Some even managed to insert a spear into a horse's side, although not with enough force to stop it.

Ator was one of those men who risked getting close enough to do that. But his bet went wrong, and the animal fell on him, almost without him realising it. The one-eyed man, who wasn't one-eyed yet, had lost his best spear and only had a shorter one left, designed not for throwing but for close combat. And that's what he tried to do.

But the horse faced him, reared up on its hind legs, offering its belly to the man, who tried to embed the weapon in the animal's belly. Bad idea. Even though he tried to do it from the side, he couldn't avoid a powerful kick landing on his face, leaving him unconscious. The impact was severe, and eventually, it cost him his eye.

The tribe, although at its peak in terms of number of people, was still insufficient to cordon off the area, and many animals escaped. Mostly through the gap left by Ator being out of the game.

"We must prevent more from escaping!" Unnum ordered, urging the hunters. "If others notice this gap, they'll avoid the cliff and come this way!"

And that's what they did. The men regrouped, waved their torches, shouting louder than ever, and managed to corral them.

When the horses reached the abyss, they naturally slowed down, but the force of those behind them, completely unbridled, pushed the ones in front towards their fatal destiny.

Tabal had the nightmarish scene etched into his retina. No less than fifteen or twenty animals fell one after another, crashing against the ground below in a colossal drop.

Men and women hugged and celebrated greatly for that resounding success, in an operation where only Ator was injured. Too bad they could only make use of the meat from two or three animals, as the others would rot in a short time.

Now, they just had to descend the gorge and reach the bottom of the canyon to secure the precious food before the predator found it. And that wasn't a minor matter. By Samman's decision, the hunters prepared to descend the most difficult but also the shortest path. They would save a lot of time and could arrive before the hyenas, common in the area. Only he and a couple of men stayed behind and accompanied the women and children on the easy path. It wasn't a good idea to leave them alone in the middle of the night in such places, and in fact, their group was more at risk than the hunters'.

During that time, Tabal was already twelve seasons old and considered himself a hunter. Therefore, he chose to accompany Unnum's group along the steep path.

However, he didn't have enough strength yet, and the gravel covering the narrow trail caused him to slip, holding on only to a branch of a small bush.

"Help!" he shouted, swinging, completely defenceless. Around him, the moon barely illuminated more than the vertical walls of those immense rock formations, and in the background, the darkness of the abyss loomed beneath his feet.

"Help!" he pleaded, as the bush broke loose from the ground, and Tabal fell, just like the horses had fallen a little earlier...

And at that moment, he woke up. Someone had grabbed him.

"What's wrong, Tabal?" Umma asked. The young man had taken a brief nap for a moment and had dreamed that scene again. The girl noticed his agitated breathing and grabbed his arm.

"Nothing, just a nightmare," he replied, recovering. "Speak softly," he whispered. "You might scare away the animals if they come to drink."

"What were you dreaming about?"

The boy sighed and then said, "As we talked about the horses earlier, I relived what happened that day."

"Do you mean, what happened to Ator? Did it affect you so much?"

"No, it's not that. It's... well," he resisted telling her, but eventually did. "When we descended the gorge where the animals fell, I slipped and almost fell into the void. It was night, and visibility was poor. If it weren't for Unnum, who gave me a hand, I would have died that day."

"Well... thank goodness."

"Yes," he sighed again. "It wasn't the first time he saved my life."

Umma stared at him, as if expecting him to tell her more. But Tabal wasn't in the mood.

"Now, go to sleep. Dawn shouldn't be far, and the animals will be coming... if they come sometime. We shouldn't talk anymore, not even in whispers."

The girl obeyed and laid down, although she couldn't fall asleep anymore that night. She stared at her companion, who now paid close attention to the surrounding sounds. Absolute silence was essential to knowing where the herbivores were coming from and positioning themselves close to corral them.

Finally, just before dawn, three fawns appeared on the path, and Tabal mimicked the sound of an owl to signal that he needed help. Unnum, who was closest, hurried over and blocked the exit while the young man stealthily approached the water.

Finally, when he was sure he wouldn't fail, he threw his spear, and it hit the side of a deer, which collapsed to the ground. The other fled down the path, but Unnum was waiting and pierced it directly with his spear without having to throw it. The other one ran into the bushes and disappeared.

"Two catches!" they shouted almost in unison. With that, the tribe could eat until satisfied, and there would be leftover meat. The others rushed there, but before they arrived...

They weren't alone. A pack of steppe wolves, big enough, also vied for the same food. Their eyes gleamed in the darkness, and their growls sent shivers down anyone's spine.

Wolves... thought Tabal. If it had been a tiger or a bear, it would have been less problematic. They were solitary beasts, and with all the men, now that the children were not around, forming a tight group with spears at their ready, they could have easily scared them away. But not the wolves. They attacked in packs and from all sides. It was futile to confront them, and Unnum gave the order to retreat. At least those two catches would serve to divert their attention from the camp, and the rest of the tribe would be safe. However, they would have to leave immediately.

A lucky break

The nomads continued their journey, this time towards the north-west. They found nothing. They could only collect the typical berries —few and dried—, some honey, and a few overripe nuts. The entire tribe was hungry, and the children wouldn't stop crying.

The midday heat, stifling, forced them to stop, and at dusk, they resumed the march, almost without strength. Near nightfall, they inspected some traps they had set a few days ago, and only one of them had caught something: a miserable rabbit that went entirely to the children, who were the only ones who had dinner that night.

As if that wasn't enough, they had moved quite far from the oasis and barely had any water. Some suggested returning to it, perhaps taking advantage of what the wolves might have left. But Ulla, the sorceress, had another 'vision' and forced the tribe to march southeast, towards a pasture that extended over a small plain not far from the cave. The men protested because there was no water there, but the old woman insisted, and at dawn, everyone went there.

When they arrived, nearing midday, their water supplies had run out, and the sorceress said, 'dig here'. The men dug for a while, and at about two or three cubits deep... they found water.

The liquid quenched their thirst and momentarily distracted them from hunger, if only because it filled those empty stomachs.

Afterwards, they stopped to rest with the aim of continuing in the afternoon, and groups formed among the tribe members. As always, Umma and Tabal were separated from the others, by Unnum's explicit order: no man was to approach her except her guardian. Only Kara, her stepmother, appeared there from time to time, as long as her three children allowed her.

"What happened between you and Samman?" the girl asked.

"He never told you?"

"We only know that he fell out with Unnum over a betrayal. The tribe split in two, and only three men followed him, with their women."

"Well, they weren't exactly his women. In fact, Samman left his behind and took Unnum's, who were 'better'. Younger, you know."

"Now I understand what Ulla said when she killed him: 'You won't steal women from anyone else again.'"

"Exactly. That was one of the reasons why he hated him so much."

"But those... did they go willingly?"

"They were almost children. I suppose Samman seemed stronger to them, and he actually was. Besides, they were fed up with Ulla and her paranormal obsessions. That woman is a witch, for real."

"Indeed, she is. She's... sinister."

“Not just that. She instigated the two brothers to fight.”

“When was this?”

“Well, actually, it all started much earlier when Calam, the brothers’ father, died. The two sons wanted to be chiefs, and Samman defeated Unnum in a fight, breaking some of his bones. He took control of the tribe, but that wasn’t enough: some of his women betrayed him.”

“Of course, you can’t control a tribe if you don’t have the women on your side.”

“Exactly. They hid their weapons while he slept and almost killed him, if it weren’t for some men who defended him and had to fight to save their lives. In the end, he had no choice but to escape.”

“The typical rivalry between women.”

“That’s right. When I have a wife, I’ll have only her. I’ve seen what happens when you have more than one.”

“Wouldn’t you take another wife if one was offered to you? If you liked her more than the one you already have?”

Tabal smiled and looked directly at Umma.

“If I genuinely like the wife I have, I won’t need any more,” he asserted, then looked away with a bitter expression. Then he asked, “Do you know what happened to them? To the women Samman took, I mean.”

“They weren’t with him when we arrived. I think they were stolen by another tribe.”

“Yeah, the usual. What a cruel world...”

“You wouldn’t steal other men’s women, would you? If you liked one more than the one you have?”

“Me? Never. It’s something that disgusts me. I follow Unnum and obey him because I have no choice.”

“Just for that?”

“Not just. He treated me well when I was a child.”

“Are you Unnum’s son?”

“No. I never got to know my parents.”

“What happened?

“I barely remember. I must have been... I don’t know... two or three seasons old at most. It was because of the volcano.”

“What volcano?”

“Of course. You must have been in the north around that time. But not far from here, there was a massive eruption... an entire mountain exploded and flooded the area with lava. The entire land to the west was devastated, and it seems like my parents must have died there. I only remember the heat, the smoke, the ashes... and also Unnum,

who picked me up and took me with him when his father was still alive. Around that time, he didn't have sons yet and treated me as if I were his own. His wife, Masha, has been like a mother to me."

"Masha? Do you mean the one who has taken care of Sudda's son, the woman who died the day you found us?"

"Yes, her. She fell out of favour when Unnum preferred Ladda, and now she's unhinged. The chief is not the same as before, and he despises the children he had with her. In fact, she doesn't sleep with him anymore."

"What a sad destiny for her."

"Indeed. But now Ladda sees her 'throne' in jeopardy if Unnum becomes infatuated with your companion, his new wife. What's her name? Thura?"

"Yes. Do you think it will happen?"

"What?"

"That Ladda will suffer the same fate as Masha, and her children will also be despised."

"Most likely. Unnum has always preferred young wives."

"How harsh life is!" Umma sighed. "When it's not the dangers of nature, we create problems for ourselves."

"That's how it is," he nodded, looking away. "And this tribe is one of the worst."

"All tribes are like that, Tabal. At least, you were lucky."

"Me? Don't believe it. At first, Ulla wanted to sacrifice me."

"Oh, really?"

"It's the custom. Whenever someone is found or when a tribe expands through conquest, a sacrifice has to be made to the gods. You know, the tribe increases its resources, and the gods have to take their share as tribute. As gratitude, so to speak. And since I was the only one they found, there was no other candidate."

"And what happened? Did Unnum convince her not to do it?"

"No. On the night before the full moon, Ulla had a dream. Baloc told her not to kill me because I was a survivor, and as such, I would bring survival to the tribe."

"Wow! Another talisman, like me."

"Yes, it could be. That's why Ulla gave me this name, Tabal. I was so shaken by the volcano that I couldn't even remember my own name."

"What does it mean?"

"Tabal? It means Baloc's protégé."

"But wouldn't that be 'Ta-Baloc'?"

"No. That would mean 'to protect Baloc'," he replied. "In our language, to express possession, the name loses its last syllable."

“Ah! That’s right, I forgot. I still don’t handle your language well.”

“Oh, no, I think you handle it very well, Umma. For only knowing it for three seasons, you speak it as well as I do.”

The girl shrugged, and he added, “That’s a sign that you’re very intelligent.”

“Thanks,” she replied, looking away. “Perhaps the two languages are similar.”

“I don’t think so. When I hear you talking to Kara, I don’t understand anything. I don’t understand a word. Other times we’ve seen other people, but we’ve been able to communicate.”

“Of course, because you all belong to the ‘Samo’ people, the people who have always lived here.”

“That’s right. Which are your people, then?”

“The ‘Kuru’ people. Tradition says that our origin is far away, in the north-east, and for some reason we went west, but always in the north. Until a few of us came down to the south and met Samman.”

“The Kuru people... is that why your stepmother is called Kara?”

“I don’t know,” she shrugged. Then she asked:

“Hey, Tabal, do you think I’ll be that lucky? I mean, the luck you had. Do you think Ulla will regret her decision to kill me?”

“Hopefully!” he replied, with a wish that came from the depths of his heart. “But it’s impossible,” he lamented. “Since then, she hasn’t lifted the sentence of anyone, especially not a woman.”

“Why not a woman?”

“Women are more valuable than men. Just look at what happened with your tribe. Men’s lives aren’t valuable, and we kill them all. But not women.”

“Only for that?” she was offended. “Are we more valuable because one can have a larger harem?”

“Not just for that. The more women a tribe has, the larger it will be, as they will have more children. A tribe with many men and only one woman, for example, will never grow.”

“I see,” she understood. “But then I don’t get it, Tabal. If women are more valuable, why sacrifice them? Why sacrifice me?”

“Exactly for that reason. The greater the value of what is sacrificed, the more inclined the gods will be to help us. You are the most valuable thing we have, and in this way, Ulla hopes to please Baloc and get him to send us rain,” he explained. Tabal couldn’t understand how Umma didn’t know these things. “Didn’t you have sacrifices in your tribe?”

“Only animals. Our sorceress said that human sacrifices, far from pleasing God, repel him.”

“Oh...,” he was surprised.

“But do you believe that?” Umma continued. “Do you believe that if I die, you will live better?”

“No. I don’t believe that. Baloc couldn’t have created something as wonderful as you are,” he looked at her tenderly, “just to die so young.”

She smiled and stroked his cheek. Then she said:

“But then, why did Baloc tell her during that trance, that I had to die?”

“Who knows!” he shrugged. “Maybe it wasn’t Baloc. Maybe it was some other god, or even a demon. Or it could have been her imagination. That old woman is crazy. It’s a shame that our fate is in the hands of a person like her.”

“Indeed,” she replied. “Anyway,” she wondered, “I don’t understand, Tabal. If you’re so unhappy here, why don’t you leave?”

“Where would I go?” he replied. “It’s already difficult to survive as part of a tribe... so being alone... But don’t think I haven’t thought about it. It’s an idea that crosses my mind... often.”

At that moment, one of the men who was on an elevation watching over the camp came running and said:

“The aurochs!”

“Where?” asked Unnum.

“Behind that hill,” he pointed. “If we surround it well, we could corner it in a small ravine behind.”

“Let’s go!” ordered the chief.

All the men jumped instantly and grabbed their weapons. If they managed to hunt that animal, hunger would end.

When they arrived, the beast was grazing on the sparse grass in a small hollow. All the men positioned themselves around it and began to approach slowly.

The aurochs, a giant gleaming in the sun, almost taller than a man, sensed the presence of the hunters and raised its head, sniffing the air with its wide nostrils. Its horns measured more than two cubits and were as thick at the base as a child’s leg.

The beast let out a snort that echoed through the valley like the war cry of a hundred warriors, but it didn’t deter the hunters, who kept stealthily and determinedly approaching.

Before they were within spear range, the giant beast charged towards one of them. The warrior waited as his companions ran to join him. When the creature was close enough, he hurled his spear with all his might towards the neck, but it hit the skull and didn’t stick. However, it left the animal stunned for a moment, and the others used to throw their spears at its side. Only two of them lodged into its back as the creature thrashed.

The aurochs kept running with the spears embedded, fiercely colliding with two men who were sent flying, crashing with a muffled thud. The uncontrollable animal ran

towards Unnum, Ator, and Tabal, who were in a poorly defended position. The chief managed to thrust a third spear into its hindquarters, slowing it down a bit. The beast, weighing as much as ten men, continued charging towards them. Ator, perhaps intentionally, hindered the chief's movements, leaving him exposed to the animal, which had him ready to be rammed with its horns. Unnum stumbled, losing his other spear, and was trapped against a rock wall, just ten steps away from the creature.

He would have surely died if Tabal hadn't stepped between him and the beast, diverting its attention. The manoeuvre succeeded in slowing it down, and that was Tabal's intention. The young man was ready, holding his spear firmly. When the animal reached him, the weapon was waiting, and its own weight drove it through the neck to the heart. The aurochs roared, echoing through the hills before collapsing and shaking the ground. Ator followed, driving his spear into the animal, as did the others.

Unnum got up and embraced the young man with tears in his eyes, shooting a cold glance at the one-eyed man, who, however, seemed unfazed and joined the men celebrating the significant victory.

Once the danger had passed, the whole tribe gathered around the dead animal, celebrating with joy and embracing each other.

It took quite some time before the still excited chief addressed Tabal, silencing the tribe so he could be heard.

"Hey, my young friend!" he exclaimed ecstatically. "You saved my life and maybe the lives of many others. It's customary to grant a woman to those who distinguish themselves in war, but I want to make an exception for you."

The boy's heart started pounding, and he looked towards Umma, who also gazed at him anxiously. At that moment, Ulla tugged at Unnum's sleeve and whispered something to him, and he nodded in response. The chief continued:

"From now on, I grant you Kara, who will no longer be Ator's woman but will become your wife."

"What?" the one-eyed man shouted. "Kara is mine!"

"Ah! Now you're interested? You didn't seem to like her much when I first offered her to you."

"She's mine, Unnum!" he bellowed. "You can't take her away from me!"

"She was!" he emphasised. "Now she belongs to Tabal."

The young man looked at the disgruntled husband and made a face as if to say, "It's not my fault...". But Ator immediately confronted the chief, grabbing his arm and bringing his single eye close to his face:

"You have no right. Do you hear me? No right!"

Unnum shook off that hand with fury and muttered under his breath:

"Should have put more effort, one-eyed. Maybe I would've given you one of mine if you had been the one to save my life."

“Give one of yours to the boy if you owe him that much,” he whispered fiercely.

“If I owe it to him, it’s because you took it from me earlier. You know what I mean.”

The chief couldn’t forgive Ator for leaving him exposed to the aurochs, probably on purpose. The two held each other’s gaze for a moment, and finally, the one-eyed man said:

“This won’t end here, Unnum.”

The tribe feasted heartily on the animal's meat, starting with the softest parts, the organs, as they are harder to preserve. Next, they cooked all the remaining meat and smoked the rest to make it last longer. Before nightfall, Unnum's clan headed towards the caves, where they would store the precious provisions in a small pit lined with aromatic leaves to ward off insects. The food would last them a good number of days before it spoiled.

During the journey, Unnum's decision to take Ator's new wife for Tabal was the talk of the tribe, and they couldn't stop discussing what had happened.

The one-eyed man travelled alone, at the rear, with a face that told a whole story. Kukta, the one-eyed man's wife and mother of his children seemed happier. Kara walked with her children beside Umma and her new husband, who didn't seem very pleased despite everything. The girl wasn't happy either, and she had a long conversation with her stepmother on the way to the caves. A conversation that was meaningless to Tabal since the two women spoke in their own language.

At dusk, they reached the promontory where their usual residence stood, the karst massif where water had carved spaces over ages in which they now lived.

As always, a fire was lit at the cave entrance, and some men lit torches and entered first to check for any lurking beasts. They explored all the nooks, and once it was confirmed there was no danger, the others entered. The women stored the provisions and then went to their respective chambers, where their husbands were happily waiting.

Kara

At the age of thirty-two, Kara faced life with pragmatism. Copulating with Ator had been neither better nor worse than with others she had been with in her life. She had eight children from six different men, three of whom still survived and accompanied her. All her husbands had died in perilous hunting sessions, attacked by beasts, succumbed to diseases, or in wars. The most recent, precisely due to the latter reason, just a few days ago. He was Samman's lieutenant, who died just before Samman.

That she remained alive after eight childbirths in such a hostile world was quite a feat, and she truly considered herself a survivor. She knew few women who had reached her age, and Ulla, the witch of her new tribe, was one of them. Ulla even surpassed her, likely being over forty.

Now Kara was Tabal's woman, and she didn't expect anything particular from the act of love, except that the boy would probably finish quickly, being young and, as rumoured, a virgin. Since it was his first time, Kara's children spent that night with Cadfe's new wife —the unattractive woman rejected by Ator—, whose offspring were familiar friends so that their mother's absence wouldn't be noticed.

She prepared appropriately like any female assigned to a male: she washed her pubis and lay down naked, waiting for her husband, who was still talking with other men in the centre of the cave. While waiting, she reviewed the plan they were going to execute that night, which, if successful, would save Umma from death.

It all started the previous night when Kara lay with Ator. The one-eyed man did something that no other man had done before; he touched her breasts. If those small protrusions that barely stood out from her torso could be called 'breasts'. In fact, now that her last child had finished breastfeeding a long time ago, they were practically indistinguishable from those of any man. Moreover, men generally had even more due to their constantly used and thus well-developed musculature.

But the size of Kara's breasts was not an exception but the norm, with the real exception being her stepdaughter's. Breasts that Ator undoubtedly desired, as was clear with that gesture he made towards Kara.

So, when they finished copulating, she asked him:

"You desire Umma, don't you?"

"Yes," he responded bluntly. The main firelight of the cave timidly reached where they were, and Kara could see the anger reflected in the eyes —or rather, the only eye— of her former husband, now that she was assigned to Tabal.

"Wouldn't you like her to be your wife?" she continued. He didn't answer but made a clear gesture of agreement.

"What's stopping you?" she insisted, sensing the possibility of saving the girl.

"Well, to do that," he replied, "I'd have to kill Unnum and declare myself chief. That, for a start."

"Would that save her?"

“First, I’d have to lie with her. Then she’d no longer be a virgin, and Ulla wouldn’t kill her. She would sacrifice one of the captured girls, who are also virgins, in her place.”

Hearing that, Kara fell silent. It wasn’t a plan to replace Umma with another girl, who could be one of hers. But that was foreseeing too much. Perhaps he wouldn’t sacrifice any, or if he did, it might be Sudda’s baby, who was sick and would die anyway.

“The problem is Tabal,” Ator continued. “I’d have to kill him too.”

“Is he really the problem?” she wondered. “Is the boy more difficult than Unnum?”

“No,” he smiled, “I can kill him even with one eye closed.”

“That easy? He’s a strong lad…”

“Yes, but I’m stronger. I’ve killed many men in my life, while he hasn’t killed anyone.”

“So, what’s the problem?”

“I’m fond of him,” he replied. “I know I’d have to kill him to get the girl, and I wouldn’t like to do that.”

“Well… I could talk to him. If I convince him to stay still when you…”

“It won’t work,” he interrupted. “He’s loyal to Unnum until death. Why do you think he left her in his care?” he muttered angrily. “Because he knows he won’t betray him,” he affirmed.

That was the conversation they had the previous night. But now things had changed. It was actually quite lucky that the young man hunted the aurochs, and even more so that, as a reward for saving him, Unnum granted her as a wife to him. Because that made things very easy to carry out the plan, and on the way to the caves, Kara approached Ator for a moment and said:

“I’ve talked to Umma, and she’s going to cooperate.”

The one-eyed man was pleasantly surprised. He had already decided to kill Unnum, as what had happened that afternoon after hunting the aurochs was the last straw. He was pleased to find that there was someone else on his side.

“And what about Tabal?” he asked, cautiously.

“I’ll take care of him. I’ll keep him ‘busy’, you know what I mean, and I assure you he won’t find out about anything.”

The man grinned mischievously and said:

“Well then, I’ll take care of Unnum.”

The plan

Tabal was taking too long to arrive. From where Kara was, which were the ‘quarters’ of her new husband, only a murmur of the conversations of the other men in the tribe in the central part of the cave could be heard. Maybe she had been too quick to go there, and should have stayed with the others...

Certainly, she was eager to carry out the plan, which, in principle, shouldn’t fail. Or would it?

The wait was making her nervous, and she wondered if, instead of what she had devised, it would be better for them to escape with Umma to save her from death. But she quickly dismissed the idea. They couldn’t survive alone wandering in that hostile world, and they would probably die shortly after escaping, either as prey for predators or, worse, from hunger. Finding another tribe that would accept the two of them and the three kids before long was a possibility, but a rather remote one.

Women and children were a precious commodity: the former for their sexual value, and as for the latter, the boys would eventually become new warriors to enhance the tribe’s power, and the girls would become new wives to compensate those who distinguished themselves in war. Because neither women nor children were killed in battles that almost invariably took place whenever two tribes met. On the contrary, their lives were respected and assigned to the most valiant warriors. Ulla’s custom of sacrificing to the gods, at least one person among those captured, was fortunately something uncommon.

But if they escaped, waiting for someone to take them in before they died on the steppe was nearly impossible due to the scarcity of people in a world that was practically uninhabited. In fact, Unnum’s tribe was the first they had seen in many weeks, and they had stayed an even longer time in the past without seeing anyone. And if it was difficult for two women, for one alone —Umma, in case she escaped alone—, it was nearly impossible. The only possibility for the girl to survive until the full moon was a change of mind in the executioners’ minds, although nothing predicted that it would happen if it hadn’t already since her death sentence was signed.

Therefore, it had to be forced. A ‘coup’ had to be forced, and that’s what Kara was involved in that night.

Ator was hurt when Unnum took the stepmother away to give her to Tabal, but he also didn’t resign himself to losing Umma, who was obviously his first choice. After all, he had the law on his side: he was entitled by the right of conquest, and although the chief had the preference in choosing the conquered women, Unnum granted him the right to ‘choose anyone he wanted’ in the next war, that is, the one that had just been fought, due to a brave performance that occurred in the past.

The ‘coup’ was feasible. With Unnum dead, Ator would take over the leadership and declare Umma as his wife, with Kara being the witness that the marriage had been consummated. No longer being a virgin and also being the leader’s wife, Ulla would have to revoke her death sentence and find another sacrificial victim.

That might be the only part of the plan that could go wrong: that the sorceress wouldn't accept Ator as the leader. That would put him against the other men, and Umma's life might even be in danger.

Although, deep down, the old woman couldn't blame the one-eyed man for assaulting the girl; the blame would always be on Tabal, for not fulfilling his duty of vigilance and, above all, on Unnum, for assigning that task to an incompetent.

Still, the crime would've gone down, and Ator would've defiled the body of a young girl who was supposed to be sacrificed as a virgin to the gods. But thinking it over, Ulla would have no choice but to accept the done deal. The old woman was evil, but she was also pretty smart. In the absence of Unnum, Ator was the only man with enough guts and courage to pull the tribe through. Essentially, he was the only 'alpha male' left, as the others, though tough and hardworking, lacked the smarts and necessary ability to make the best decisions in such a hostile world.

"Here they come," Kara thought, hearing footsteps approaching where she was. Because the fact that she was now Tabal's wife didn't exempt him from Umma's watch, as he was the only tribe member Unnum trusted for that job. Any other guy would've taken the opportunity to hook up with the girl without hesitation, but this guy kept his head cool enough and didn't risk it for something like that.

So, that 'wedding night' between Kara and Tabal had an unwelcome guest in Umma. That had been quite lucky for the plans that mother and daughter had in mind, plans that necessarily had to have the girl's agreement, who had already been convinced by her stepmother that it was the best thing that could happen to her.

As a good guardian, Tabal hadn't left the girl for a moment. But Kara had chatted with her in her language, so he hadn't caught on to anything.

Her first idea had been to kill him. Now that she was his wife, she could stab him with a knife at any time during the intimate act. Really, that would've been the logical thing to do to make the plan work. Kara never believed that Ator didn't want to do it because he 'liked the boy', but rather because he was afraid to face a young man in the prime of his visual faculties in a poorly lit place, having to rely on just one eye. Killing Unnum in the same circumstances was easier despite everything, as the chief was known to sleep like a log, and a surprise attack would be more effective. On the other hand, the young man would undoubtedly be on guard because his mission was to prevent anyone from approaching the girl.

But the problem was that Tabal couldn't be eliminated so easily. Umma had made it clear that she wouldn't cooperate with all that and would scream, waking up the whole tribe if they dared to touch the boy. So, Kara came up with a second plan, which was to neutralise the young man in the way she knew best: by getting close to him. It was highly likely that, in the dimness of the cave and being his first time, the boy wouldn't even realize that Ator had appeared and taken Umma to lie with him. Yes, that would work with total certainty, the woman told herself. Kara was an expert in giving pleasure to men; she had always been the favourite of all those she had been with, and perhaps that was why three of her children were still alive. They always got the best portions and had priority over the children of others. Nothing could happen to the boy

afterwards for not keeping a close enough eye, as Unnum would already be dead, and he couldn't be punished for it.

Finally, Tabal and Umma arrived, and the girl lay down wrapped in her megaloceros hide at the cave's end. Kara smiled at him and took off the hide covering her body, revealing her nakedness to her new husband. In fact, they couldn't yet be called husband and wife until Tabal lied with her; technically, she was still Ator's wife until consummation.

Surprisingly, the guy just passed by her, giving her a smile in return, and lay down between the two women, with his back turned to his supposed new wife. Almost instantly, the young man fell asleep, as indicated by his deep and rhythmic breathing.

This attitude puzzled Kara. Why had he ignored her? That was certainly a surprise. A virgin boy, in the prime of his youth... why hadn't he taken her as his wife? Even though she was 'older', and despite her numerous childbirths, she still had a good figure, and her body hadn't deformed too much. She had good hips and could conceive a few more children. She was certainly desirable, she thought, and considered if maybe the boy didn't like... No. She dismissed the idea almost immediately. Tabal didn't miss a detail of Umma's female attributes; he couldn't stop looking at her, and it was clear that it wasn't just to keep an eye on her.

Of course... the boy had fallen in love, she concluded. It was said that some men were capable of that thing they called 'falling in love', although she hadn't seen any cases in her long life. Men only saw women as females to copulate with, just like animals did.

In any case, she had to act immediately because Ator would be about to arrive to take Umma. Although Tabal seemed to be asleep, he was likely only in a light doze, and the slightest noise would wake him. Therefore, she was about to sit up to wake him and try to make love, but at that moment, she felt a sharp pain in her stomach, and her insides churned. Nausea almost made her vomit, and she got up to go outside the cave to relieve herself. Once outside, she felt the pain again and tried to defecate, but she couldn't despite feeling unwell. The night's cold wasn't enough to quell the intense heat she felt at that moment, and she seemed to sweat from every pore of her body. Then she crouched down, as it seemed like she was peeing herself, although nothing like that happened. What occurred was that a stream of blood, like menstrual blood, came out of her vagina, despite being almost two lunar cycles late in her period. In fact, she thought she was pregnant, and then this... could be a spontaneous abortion, she thought. In any case, once that embryo or whatever it was, was expelled, she felt much better and got up to go back to the cave. Before leaving, she turned and looked for what she had expelled, but she couldn't find it. The almost full moon provided enough light to highlight that clot, but surprisingly, she couldn't find it! She recalled some conversations that certain women from her new tribe had had about the disappearance of blood flows, and wondered if the same thing had now happened to her. It was impossible to know, she thought.

When she entered, she navigated the fire at the cave's edge again and could see and hear some commotion in the area where Unnum lay. That was a sign that Ator had completed the first part of the plan, meaning he had killed the chief, and moreover, he had done it 'professionally', without waking the others, as indicated by the fact that the

little ruckus had ceased, and no other noise could be heard in the area where the rest were. The former wives of the chief must have played some role, being resentful of the new one. What had happened to her? She wondered. What had become of Thura? Perhaps she had suffered the same fate as her new husband?

Ator

In any case, the problem was that she hadn't fulfilled her part of the plan. She consoled herself, thinking the boy had fallen asleep, and maybe Umma could escape from him when Ator arrived, without him waking up, something that would be happening at that very moment. But she was wrong: as she suspected, Tabal wasn't sound asleep, and he felt the steps of someone approaching. Recognizing the one-eyed man immediately by his way of walking, his figure was faintly illuminated by the fire, projecting a ghostly shadow on the wall.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, standing up, with a hint of threat.

Ator was surprised not to see Kara there and not find her laying with the boy. He quickly suspected betrayal, but quickly dismissed the idea. Probably, the young man had 'finished' quickly, and she couldn't keep 'entertaining' him, so she preferred to leave and not witness the scene.

"Get out!" demanded Tabal.

For a moment, Ator considered killing the boy. Despite having only one eye, the warrior was superior in combat to him, although in the dimness of the cave, he was at a disadvantage against a teenager in the prime of his visual faculties. Still, he didn't give up on what he had come to do.

"You, be quiet. This has nothing to do with you," he flanked him and approached Umma, who was starting to get up.

"I vouch for her; you know that," the boy stood between the two.

"Step aside," he muttered firmly, but Tabal didn't move.

"No, Ator, you can't touch her! Leave!" he shouted.

"Your shouting won't help. The sound doesn't reach where the others are."

"Leave!" he repeated, extending an arm and pointing towards the exit.

But at that moment, Ator lunged at him, twisted his extended arm, kneed him in the stomach, and then forcefully threw him to the back of the cave, where he hit hard.

Tabal was out of commission, and Ator pounced on Umma, proceeding to rip off her loincloth and removing his own. Umma, who initially intended to let it happen, fought back and began screaming, but Ator covered her mouth with his strong hand. Then he hit the girl and forced her to lie on the ground. But when he was about to rape her, he received a strong blow to the head. Tabal, although affected by the stomach pain and twisted arm, had enough strength to turn around and strike him from behind with one of his spears. The one-eyed man complained seriously about the blow and got up to engage with the boy, but as he did, he felt dizzy. The blow had been strong, and he stumbled, tripping, and then fell back to the ground.

Umma got up and covered herself, then asked Tabal:

"Is he dead?"

"No. Just stunned," he managed to say, panting.

“What happened here?” Kara asked, just arriving. Umma looked at her and gestured with her head, turning it from side to side, as if indicating that things had now changed. That’s when she noticed Ator on the ground.

“We must escape before he wakes up,” said Tabal, addressing the girl.

“Escape?”

“Yes. You and me.”

The boy had been thinking about the idea of escaping for a while. He was certainly in love with Umma and couldn’t bear to see her die during the full moon. With Ator’s attack, he finally made up his mind.

“No, Tabal!” intervened Kara. “You can’t escape!”

“Why not?”

“Because Unnum is dead. Ator killed him, and now he is the chief.”

“Unnum is dead?”

Kara nodded.

“More reason to leave. Ator will kill both of us.”

“No, Tabal. If Umma were his wife...”

“His wife? Whose?”

“Ator’s. Being the chief, and if Umma is no longer a virgin, Ulla wouldn’t have a reason to sacrifice her, and...”

“I don’t want to be the wife of the one-eyed man!” the girl jumped, moving closer to the boy.

“Umma! You have no choice!” warned Kara, using her own language, the Kuru’s one.

“Let’s go now!” urged the boy, heading towards the exit.

“Wait, Tabal,” Kara stood in his way. “Where will you go?”

Kara knew that the chances of survival for two isolated individuals in the steppe, in those inhospitable places, and worse, being pursued, were practically nil. Only under the protection of a tribe could one survive, and barely at that.

“I don’t know where we’ll go. What I do know is that tomorrow is the full moon, and Ulla will execute her at dusk. And she’ll do it, whoever the chief is.”

“What if you’re the chief?”

“Me?”

It was clear that the second plan had also failed. Tabal was in love with Umma, and only over his dead body would he consent to Ator becoming her husband, which was the only way to prevent her death. What was worse, Umma also seemed to be in love with the boy. Two kids playing at being adults in a world surrounded by beasts, quite literally. So, Kara quickly thought and devised a third plan.

“Yes, you, the chief. Why not? There’s a more sensible way to end all of this, Tabal. Unnum is dead, but now you have to do the same with Ator,” she said, looking towards the man still on the ground. “If you kill him, you could be the chief, and Umma would be saved.”

“No,” he replied. “Even if I did, the others wouldn’t accept me as such.”

“Yes, they would! They are rough men, but they are used to obeying. With Unnum dead and knowing that you killed Ator, all it would take is a few shouts and a few orders, and they would obey without question. I’ve seen it countless times, Tabal!”

“And what about Ulla? Would she obey too?”

“I’ll take care of that witch. Don’t worry about her.”

The boy pondered the decision for a moment and picked up his weapons from the ground. Kara insisted,

“It’s now or never!”

“Then it will be never,” he replied, looking towards the one-eyed man, who was starting to revive. “I have never killed a man in cold blood, and this won’t be the first time.”

“But he tried to kill you!”

“No,” he replied calmly. “He just wanted to get me away from Umma. Besides,” he concluded, “I don’t want to be part of this tribe anymore, not even as a chief. I stayed with them out of loyalty to Unnum, but now that he’s gone... nothing holds me back. Let’s go!” He grabbed the girl’s hand, and she followed him without hesitation.

“Wait, Tabal,” Kara blocked their way again. “How will you survive out there?”

“I’m an expert hunter and know how to set traps. We’ll survive. Let’s go!”

The woman turned her head from side to side, but it was futile. She could see determination in a man’s eyes, and she couldn’t do anything to hold them back. Finally, Tabal headed towards a side of the cave she didn’t know, and they left through it. The couple embarked on their escape and disappeared into the distance, blending in with the night wind.

Kara remained a few more moments at the entrance of that secret exit and finally turned back to the cave. When she entered, Ator was starting to sit up, though very clumsily, and she considered whether she should kill him herself at that moment with her bone knife. Why hadn’t Tabal thrust his spear into him instead of just hitting him with it? She wondered. Certainly, he had the right to kill anyone who approached Umma. Was it because of a lack of courage?

No, certainly not, she answered herself. The bravery he showed with the aurochs ruled out that he was a coward. Certainly, that boy was special. He wasn’t like the other men! At his age, many had already killed several and even had children with multiple women. He was special, undoubtedly, just as Umma was, whom she had now lost. A tear escaped from her eyes, and she wondered what would become of them now. Two people couldn’t survive for long without the protection of a tribe.

That thought made her abandon the idea of killing Ator, remembering her other children. After Unnum, Ator was the strongest and most capable man in the tribe, and his leadership was necessary for survival. Something that Umma and Tabal probably wouldn't achieve. Knowing how to set traps wouldn't help if there were no prey. In that territory, only a few large mammals migrated north, fleeing the drought. Hunting them was a titanic effort that involved all the members of the tribe, and two isolated teenagers couldn't survive for long on the scarce berries they could collect. Fruits already dried up after so many months without rain.

Finally, Ator sat up, lying back down on the ground with his hands over his face. She couldn't see him well in the dim light, but he surely had a large lump on his head.

"Come on, Ator, sleep," she leaned in, covering him with one of her hides. It was necessary for him not to sound the alarm so that the kids could escape. "Tomorrow you'll feel better."

Part Two

The wait

"We can't stay here, Ladda. We gotta get out."

"Get out? Where to?"

Many days had passed. Too many, since all the men went off to hunt down the runaways.

The aurochs meat had already rotted, and those left in the tribe had gone many days without food. They only drank a little of the water dripping at one end of the cave, but it was dwindling. With no men taking the lead in hunting, the women and children were left to wait for their return or to venture north into the unknown.

Kara was in favour of the latter, but Ladda and Masha, Unnum's former women, resisted. The three were the only ones capable of any constructive dialogue, as the others had gone mad watching their children die, likely from eating that putrid meat.

"Get out, anywhere but here," said Umma's stepmother. "The cave's leaks are drying up, and if we drink stagnant water... you know what'll happen."

Masha started crying. Her baby was almost a year old and constantly demanded to breastfeed. The poor woman's nipples were sore and red, as the milk was coming out with less intensity, and the baby sucked forcefully to increase a flow that was insufficient for his nutritional needs. At this age, he should have been supplemented with some fruit, but there was nothing like that left in the cave. In fact, the child had suffered from diarrhoea for several days after trying some rotten figs they still had.

"Leaving means certain death, Kara," Ladda replied. "The beasts will kill us. We must wait for the men to return."

"The men won't come back. By now, they're all probably dead."

"How do you know? Are you some kind of sorceress or something?"

"Ator assured they'd be back in two days. Three at most."

"The boy, Tabal... may have taken longer."

"I don't doubt it. But Umma can't run. Her breasts move a lot when she does, causing her discomfort."

"That much?"

"That's what she always said. 'Normal' women don't have that problem; we can't understand it. But I've seen the sway of her breasts when we've had to flee, and I believe it."

Ladda fell silent. Indeed, those two teenagers were no match for an experienced group of hunters on a capture mission.

"What do you think might have happened?" she finally said.

"With the men? I don't know. But the kids probably escaped."

"Escape? Why? How could they?"

"Maybe they hid in the mountains, and the men didn't find them. Then... maybe they followed a false lead and lost track of them."

"That's highly unlikely, Kara. Although..." she considered, "well, I know Tabal well. He's very skilled at that and may have managed to fool them. It's hard, but it could be."

"It's the only thing I can think of, Ladda. If they had been caught, Umma would have been sacrificed, the boy would be dead, and the men would have returned many days ago."

"Okay, but why haven't they? They can't be endlessly following a false trail. Sooner or later, they'd give up and come back."

"Why would they do that?" Kara folded her arms.

"Why? Well, because not coming back condemns us all to death. Doesn't that seem like reason enough? Us and their children, of course."

"I asked because I don't know what your men are like. I don't know if they'd be capable of doing that. I've been in many tribes and seen it all."

"Yeah..." Ladda turned slightly, resting her right hand on her chin as she looked down. Then she said, "Ator is very capable of finding other women and not coming back. Cadfe and Alu... not so much. And the others... well, it depends on what they've found, if they found anything at all."

"Well, if that's the case, we should leave immediately. No one's coming for us."

"Okay, but what if it's not the case? What if they've gone too far and are taking just as long to return? And since they can't show up empty-handed, they're delaying because they're carrying sacks of food and can't run."

"You're too optimistic, Ladda."

"I have no choice but to be optimistic, Kara. For our sake and that of our children, I have to be optimistic!"

"Optimism won't feed us," she asserted. "Besides, we're assuming things that might not have happened. Maybe the kids hid, and the hunters scattered to find them. And then..."

"The beasts picked them off one by one."

"Exactly. The northern mountains are full of tigers, I believe."

Ladda pondered that for a moment and added, "It's also possible that Umma and Tabal were killed by those same beasts and..."

"Very likely."

"...and the men didn't find their bodies. They kept searching in small groups and..."

"And the tigers did their job."

"Yes, exactly. That could be," Unnum's widow pondered. "But if that is the case, it's even worse. If they couldn't fend off the attack of wild animals, can we do it, a group of hungry and exhausted women surrounded by children who are even worse off?"

Kara sighed. The woman was right. In fact, the expedition should have returned within two or three days at most, assuming the kids were dead, as the chances of survival for both were very slim. Especially for Umma, who would slow down the more skilled Tabal and thus be an easy target for wild animals. But Ator's resentment and Ulla's hatred surely had driven that expedition to its bitter end; they wouldn't have stopped until they found their bodies.

"I wouldn't worry so much about the beasts, Ladda," she finished saying.

"How can you not? Then what should we worry about?" she replied, agitated.

"Listen to me," she tried to calm her. "We might have a chance if..."

"How!"

Kara sighed, then after a moment said, "Yes, we need to avoid wooded areas, which are the most dangerous. Look, during the day we'll move across open ground, all together. If we see any animals, well... making noise, shouting, banging the ground with sticks... might make them pass by. And at night, we'll surround ourselves with fires, making sure someone is always on watch."

"It's risky," she affirmed, unconvinced. "Plus, why move across open ground? Animals will spot us from anywhere! Wouldn't it be better to go through the trees?"

"No, Ladda. They could come at us from above or catch us off guard from anywhere. It's better to see them coming from afar and be prepared."

The woman pondered again. One of her children cried nearby, and other one did the same. The rest of the mothers and their little ones lay down, looking at the two women with indifference and resignation, in an almost catatonic state, awaiting death. At this point, they would do anything the two decided, completely surrendering. Though, surely, many wouldn't move anymore.

"Alright," Unnum's ex-wife said finally. "If they don't show up today, we'll leave here tomorrow."

Exit

The plan was to return to the oasis, at least to get some water. Then they would head north-west, towards an area that in the past had some fruit trees. If they were lucky and encountered another tribe along the way, they would have a good chance of survival. Almost certainly, the women would be incorporated into the chief's harem and his distinguished warriors, and the children could finally eat.

Kara spent the night in a state of half-sleep, as hunger was so acute it prevented her from sleeping properly. It was a long evening of twelve hours, almost in autumn, spent reminiscing about the events that had led them to this situation. Especially what happened the morning after the escape of the girl she loved like a daughter.

Ator had woken up before dawn, and the first thing he did was to frantically beat her, accusing her of plotting Umma's escape. He only stopped because he wasn't in a condition to go all out: his head still hurt horribly.

Then he returned to the main chamber of the cave and woke everyone up:

"Take up arms!" he shouted. "Grab everything you can, and let's go after them!"

"Have they escaped?" Ulla asked, already awake. Upon hearing the news, she adopted a serious expression and her eyes filled with blood. Then, filled with fury, she said, "I knew it!" she muttered. "Baloc revealed it to me in a dream tonight!"

"He could have revealed it to you yesterday, damn witch!" Ator roared. "Let's go get them!"

"Where's Unnum?" The sorceress looked towards the bend where the wide "hall" of the chief's quarters was, but only Ladda emerged from there.

"Ask the one-eyed man," she said.

"He's already in the pit, with the others," he replied. "Let's go!" he urged. "Cadfe, Alu, Shacat, wake everyone else up, and let's go!"

The sorceress didn't move. "The pit" was a hole in the rock where they threw the dead, in the final area of the cave. For a moment, she stood petrified, only reacting when Cadfe exclaimed:

"You're not the chief, Ator! If Unnum's dead, we need to choose a new leader."

"Of course he's the chief!" the old woman replied. "Unnum deserved to die! It's his fault we lost the virgin... for trusting that bastard!" she shrieked, referring to Tabal. "He should have been sacrificed when we found him on the slope of that volcano."

"Don't worry about that, old woman," Ator muttered. "That 'bastard' doesn't have long. Let's go!" he shouted. "When we catch both of them, we'll sacrifice them together."

The men finished preparing, and the last resistance to the one-eyed man's leadership immediately ceased: once Ulla had acknowledged him, there was nothing more to say.

"One moment!" Ladda shouted before they left. "You can't all go!"

"Shut up, ungrateful one!" the sorceress roared, slapping the woman. Then she snapped, "If you had taken care of your man properly, this wouldn't have happened."

And she was not wrong. The former favourite of Unnum had not lifted a finger to prevent Ator from killing him. The one who did try to prevent it was Thura, his new and very young wife, but she couldn't do much to prevent that homicide, as her other rival delivered a strong blow to the back of her head that almost killed her.

"Are you coming with us too?" Ator asked, addressing Ulla.

"Of course. Only me can prevent disaster from befalling the tribe. If we catch them before the moon rises tomorrow, the gods will be pleased."

"But..." Ator thought the old woman would slow them down, and the sorceress read his mind.

"I can run faster than you if I want, for Baloc dwells within me and gives me strength."

And it was true. The old woman was wholly possessed by the devil.

"Furthermore," she continued, grabbing the one-eyed man by the balls, "I can please you better than that inexperienced virgin you desire so much."

Ator let out a sarcastic smile and turned to his men. They were all armed and ready, and at his command, they all followed him.

That was what had happened many days ago. So many that the provisions had long since run out.

Kara recalled those events, waiting for dawn to give them the signal to depart.

On her part, Ladda now had remorse for having collaborated in Unnum's death. She resented Thura's arrival in the tribe, the other teenager who joined them along with Umma, and above all, she was deeply hurt by the disdain she received from the chief when the girl flirted with her new husband.

But there was nothing she could do now. Furthermore, if Unnum were still alive, there was no guarantee that Tabal wouldn't have escaped anyway. The only difference would be that Unnum would lead the capture expedition, not Ator.

She tried to console herself with that thought, and it was then that Kara approached her and said, "Let's go now. We can't wait any longer. We must save what's left of the tribe."

And that's what they did. The two women tried to convince the others to join them, but they only managed to get the support of a few. Those who still had some sanity left had no strength to embark on a journey that probably wouldn't lead anywhere, and they preferred to sink even deeper into the profound lethargy they were already immersed in, and die there, holding onto their children.

So it was that only Kara, Ladda, Masha, Thura, and two other women, all with their children, were the ones who left the cave that morning, heading into the unknown.

The search

It was already dark when they arrived at the oasis. There was still some water —not much— and they drank until they were bursting. This way, for a while, they wouldn't feel hungry with their bellies full of liquid. The bushes surrounding the pond no longer had berries, and they could only manage to eat a few wrinkled and withered blackberries before setting off, which gave them more stomach cramps and gas than it satisfied their hunger.

They spent the night there, keeping a fire burning the whole time. The women took turns keeping watch, although some couldn't sleep all night: they kept hearing wolves howling and bears and tigers roaring nearby.

By dawn, the wild animals were gone. With any luck, they had hunted a deer or another herbivore and moved on. As they had planned, they set off northwest, to start their journey near the area devastated by the volcano years ago. At least they would have their left flank covered, as it was unlikely that danger would come from there.

There were six women, two babies, and six other children, the oldest of whom was not more than eight years old. They all dragged themselves heavily under the midday sun, trying not to stray too far from each other so that, in case the beasts arrived, they could face them as a compact group. Any member who was separated from the group could consider themselves dead, especially the little ones.

But this caution also meant that they were logically moving at the pace of the slowest person, who in this case was Masha, who, along with her baby and a slightly older girl, always lagged behind. The poor woman couldn't shake off her sadness and anguish, and crying was her constant companion on the journey.

"We're all going to die!" she screamed, again and again. "We're going to die!"

"Of course we're going to die!" Kara replied. "Did you think we'd live forever?"

"My children! My poor children!"

"Come on, Masha, hurry up," Ladda encouraged her. "With any luck, tomorrow we'll be near the fruit trees. There should still be figs, and probably chestnuts too, at this time of year. Maybe the quinces have already come out, with the heat we've had. You'll see how we get through this!"

Masha had been Unnum's first wife until she was replaced as the favourite by Ladda. The former had aged rapidly after having the first children, while the latter still retained the youthfulness of her twenties despite being close to thirty. Like Kara, she still had a defined waist, and her bright eyes gave her an attractive appearance. Despite everything, the two women didn't get along badly, despite having competed for the same man in the past. It was very different from what was happening with Thura, of course, whom Ladda couldn't stand in any way. The teenager had been deceived when they told her that the blow to her head was delivered by Ator himself, but she knew the truth and was waiting for the right moment to strike back, quite literally.

"It was her, Kara. I have no doubt about it."

Despite marching in a compact group, the two women could speak freely and even criticize the other, as they spoke in their native language.

"But if you didn't see her come in, it could well have been Ator. How can you be so sure?"

"For the same reason she wasn't touched. How is it possible that Ladda suffered no harm, and I was almost killed?"

"Because you were first. Isn't that right? He had to incapacitate you first to get to Unnum. She was after you, and since she seemed harmless, the one-eyed man didn't do anything to her."

"No. That's not how it happened. Actually, you could say we were both together, and Unnum was with us. Ator went straight for him, ignoring both of us."

"But didn't you tell me you didn't see them fight?"

"I didn't remember. The blow made me lose my memory, but now I'm clear about it. Maybe hunger is sharpening my mind, but that's what I'm telling you. Ator failed in his first attempt to stab him in the throat, and Unnum fought back. I woke up and saw them fighting, until my vision blurred, and I couldn't see anymore. She probably hit me at that moment. It couldn't have been the one-eyed man because he had enough on his plate trying to get Unnum off him."

"Was he on top of him?"

"Not exactly. They were both on the ground, trying to get on top of each other. It was probably at that moment that Ator managed to stab him before the chief could get hold of his weapons."

"That means Ladda collaborated with him. Isn't that right?"

"Of course! She was resentful, logically, and didn't do anything to stop the one-eyed man from killing him. And if she managed to kill me too, well, that's a win-win situation. Don't you think? It's impossible that she didn't wake up, with all the noise they made. That the rest of you didn't is possible, as you were further away, and besides, everything happened very quickly. But she had to wake up, just like I did."

At that moment, Ladda looked at Thura, who had said that. It was clear they were talking about her, and not in a good way. She was about to confront the young woman, but she had to attend to one of her children who wouldn't stop complaining. Then they continued talking about what happened that night.

"Okay, so then, did she stay with the two corpses —assuming you were dead too— all night?"

"Yes. I suppose to pretend she wasn't involved in the chief's murder. She probably feared Ulla's wrath, and only came out to tell the truth when Ator woke the rest of the tribe to go after Tabal."

"That could be," she agreed.

"What I don't understand is why you didn't have that same fear."

At that moment, Kara became defensive. In fact, she had concocted the whole plan and was responsible for Thura almost dying that night by inciting the one-eyed man with the "coup."

"What do you mean?" she pretended.

"I mean, if Ator had died, Ulla would have taken it out on you because you would have had to collaborate with Tabal for them to escape."

"Well, Ator didn't die."

"Yeah, but it could have happened, couldn't it?"

"No. Tabal never intended to kill him. His plan was just to escape with Umma. Actually, Ulla wasn't the problem, but the one-eyed man. Didn't you see how he left my face? My jaw still hurts from the blows he gave me. Luckily, I haven't had to use my mouth much for eating since then."

"Well, every cloud has a silver lining."

"There!" suddenly shouted one of the women. "There!" She pointed towards a figure approaching the group, running.

Indeed, it was a bear. A big brown bear that was less than a hundred steps away from them, and was approaching faster and faster, roaring wildly.

The group stopped instantly. Running would have meant certain death, and only by staying together did they have any chance. That was the rule of action with beasts: don't run. All these animals were faster than humans, so running meant being hunted down for sure. The strategy was to stay still, so the animal might hesitate if what it faced was food or not. In its small and instinctive brain, if something runs, it's food.

The six women and the eight-year-old boy formed a circle with the younger ones inside, while trying to cover the babies with the hides so they wouldn't be an easy target. If they all stayed together, the animal might think it was one large individual, and therefore, difficult to defeat. If they also shouted and challenged it, that might eventually persuade it not to attack, and it might give up and leave.

Soon, they all began to scream at the top of their lungs while shaking the sticks they carried, hitting the ground hard. The bear was surprised and slowed its pace, which was a good sign, although it kept approaching, never stopping its roar.

When it finally reached them, the aggressiveness with which those people challenged it prevented it from pouncing directly on them, and it was cautious. Instead of attacking, it stood up on its hind legs, towering over two meters tall, and opened its mouth, showing its long, sharp teeth while emitting a long, deep roar. At that moment, two women wet themselves, and two others fainted outright.

If it hadn't been because they knew positively they shouldn't flee, they would have done so right then and there. Only Kara and Ladda remained unscathed, never stopping their shouts and stick-waving, while trying to cover the gaps left by Masha and Shiba, who were the ones who fell to the ground.

At no other moment in her life did Kara miss having a man by her side. The bear was now vulnerable, showing its huge belly to them, and if any male member of the tribe had been there, he would have thrown one of their spears at the animal's abdomen and ended the danger.

But no. There were no men there, and Kara didn't have the strength to make hers pierce the beast's skin, which was now roaring threateningly and terrifyingly.

Even so, she tried. It was a simple wooden spear, roughly sharpened, as the best ones had been taken by the men on the expedition to capture Umma and Tabal. But even if it had been one of the good ones, the result would have been similar. The weapon only managed to strike obliquely near the bear's testicles, without even scratching the skin. However, it enraged the animal even more, and it lunged at them, causing two terrified children to run away through one of the gaps left when the group stopped being compact.

That was their downfall. Normally, children cling to their mothers in moments of danger, but Shiba, one of the women who fainted, didn't respond to the child's calls, leaving him feeling abandoned. The other child was one of Kara's sons, the oldest, who instinctively followed the other. But it was to no avail: the bear caught them as soon as they emerged, swatting down the first and injuring the second, Kara's son.

Then she picked up the spear from the ground and tried to prevent the animal from devouring them, approaching with the intention of stabbing it directly. But fear and the tension of the moment completely paralyzed her, and she stood there trembling uncontrollably. Only Ladda, who came to her aid, had the courage to strike the bear forcefully in the side with her own spear. That saved them, as besides the two women who remained unconscious, the other two were also paralyzed by fear and didn't move, huddling on the ground with their children.

But they couldn't do anything. The animal faced off with Ladda, and she used her staff to defend herself, landing some good blows that momentarily put the bear on the defensive. The woman stumbled and fell to the ground, and it was Kara who had to come to her aid, summoning strength from where there was none. The other woman got up, and together they waved their sticks at the bear, but it was futile. With a swipe, the animal knocked both sticks to the ground, and they both retreated, grabbing the injured child and getting out of there, praying that the bear wouldn't come after them and would be satisfied with its current prey, Shiba's son.

And that's what happened. The beast made a feint of pursuit but ultimately stopped and turned back, proceeding to tear the child apart and then devour him with relish. His mother snapped out of her daze and tried to stop it, screaming and crying in pain, and only with great effort from the other women did they prevent her from being the second victim of the day.

Now, all of them ran, while Kara's child screamed and bled from a deep wound on his back.

As for Shiba, she completely lost her mind. After losing her son, the woman was never the same again, and they struggled to prevent her from committing suicide by throwing herself against rocks or trying to distance herself from their company.

Eventually, they reached a wooded area where they attempted to regain their strength and found some water in stagnant pools nearby. It had a greenish film on top, but they drank it anyway. Better that than nothing, and the liquid tasted like heaven after the scare they had just endured.

Next, they gathered dry branches from the surroundings and made a fire around which they huddled, preparing to spend the night. The fruit trees must have been just around the corner, but they didn't have enough strength to continue forward. Perhaps they wouldn't even have it the next day.

Once the day's great scare had passed, hunger no longer stabbed at their stomachs, but instead, it drove them to remain still, lying down, trying to conserve as much energy as possible to avoid collapsing their completely emaciated and worn-out bodies.

Desperation

They were exhausted. None of the women stood guard that night, and the fire had gone out. Only Kara remained awake, trying to bring down the intense fever afflicting her eldest son. The bear's massive swipe had caused the wound to become infected and pus-ridden.

Masha was in a nearly catatonic state, as her baby had been injured in the neck when she fainted, and now he no longer cried. "Another one who won't be long for this world," thought Ladda, seeing how bad off they all were.

But the dangers hadn't passed, not by a long shot. Before they realized it, a wolf pounced on Masha and her baby, and the poor woman hardly struggled, letting the animal devour them both, almost without resistance.

The others quickly got up, but it was too late. Another pair of animals lunged at Shiba, who had escaped the bear only to fall into the clutches of two huge steppe wolves. Two more attacked the remaining children, but their mothers were quick on their reflexes and began to beat them with sticks, although it didn't prevent two kids from being bitten. Another wolf, the largest of them all, ruptured the neck of one of the women, severing her jugular vein.

In the end, they had no choice but to run again. They abandoned everything they had in that ill-fated place and gathered the children who were still alive, summoning strength from weakness as dawn began to break in the east.

Now there were only three women and five children left alive. If, as they suspected, Umma and Tabal and their pursuers had died, this was all that remained of the proud and prosperous Calam tribe, the father of Unnum and Samman, after their two sons had killed each other. Three weak, emaciated, exhausted, weary, hungry, and desperate women.

When they reached the fruit trees, most of them were dried up. There weren't even any chestnuts, and the quinces, to their dismay, had not yet ripened. The lack of water had fooled nature into thinking it was still summer, withholding the yellow colour from fruits that remained green.

The women filled themselves with those ungrateful fruits, which seemed like delicacies despite everything. They would probably suffer from gas and stomach pains that night, but they didn't care anymore. At least their children had something in their stomachs, as they couldn't even find edible insects or worms among those trees.

The food, or rather, those out-of-season fruits hadn't sat well with them, but at least their intestines managed to grab some nutrient that helped them regain some strength.

"What do we do now?" asked Thura, the young teenager, at dawn. Despite her animosity towards Ladda, after everything they had been through, the two had bonded in adversity. Kara was the worst off the three, having lost her eldest son. She had watched him die in convulsions from the intense fever, and the poor woman was devastated.

The children weren't faring any better. Only five of them remained alive, consisting of Ladda's two, Shiba's eldest daughter, and Kara's youngest. Two boys aged eight and six, and a five-year-old girl along with a pair of four-year-old twin girls from Kara. None of them were crying anymore. The harshness of life and hunger had forced them to mature quickly, and they moved through those hostile lands like automatons.

"We'll gather the quinces that are ripest and take them with us. Maybe they'll ripen along the way."

"Wouldn't it be better to stay here?" the young one responded. "Maybe someone will pass by and pick us up..."

"There's no water here, Thura. You can't rely on the puddles. If we keep drinking that, we'll surely get sick and die."

"So, what then?"

"It's better to head north," she replied. "What do you think, Kara?"

Kara took a while to respond. Finally, she lifted her gaze from the ground to briefly glance at her companions and simply nodded.

The three set off, and the children followed without protest. They were now crossing volcanic slopes where there was no life, though they did find water. It was evident that it had rained recently, and since the ground wasn't porous, there was still some water on the surface in certain depressions.

They continued like this for three days, during which they encountered no beasts because there were no prey in those desolate places. Finally, the landscape changed, and they began to see some greenery, albeit sparse. But it was also cold. As they moved northward and winter approached, their bare feet began to feel the harshness of the increasingly severe weather.

However, their diet also improved. The trees were huge, but there were plenty of walnuts, hazelnuts, and chestnuts, which helped somewhat alleviate the despair of these survivors somewhat.

"I'm thinking," said Thura, "what if we find our men here?"

"Why would they be here?" Ladda replied.

"Weren't they heading north to pursue Tabal?"

"Yes, but the north is vast, and they were more likely headed northeast."

"It's not far-fetched," Kara interjected, somewhat less downtrodden since they started eating better. The twins had regained some vitality, and she seemed more determined to press on.

"I don't think so," said Ladda. "We won't find any of them here. In my opinion, they're all dead. If not, someone would have returned to us. Not everyone was as brutish as Ator."

"Maybe the 'less brutish' ones did die," Thura suggested, "and the others stayed around here after finding new women."

"It's hard to say. Nobody lets their women be taken away just like that. They would have had to fight."

"Well, they would have fought."

"Yes, of course, but they couldn't have been many, and the chances of winning a war with so few men are slim. Don't you remember what happened to your tribe? Samman's tribe," the other nodded. "That's why I tend to think they're all dead."

Kara nodded, and at that moment, the roar of a bear was heard, along with several wolf howls in the distance. "Let's go," she said. "If we don't find someone soon, we'll end up dead too."

They got up and set off again. Since there were so few of them, it no longer made sense to march openly, so they now moved among the forests of pines and birches, trying to hide and not draw too much attention. They crossed valleys, slopes, and peaks, and from a small hill, they spotted what they were looking for:

"A tribe!" Thura shouted.

The other two peeked out, though what they saw wasn't exactly a tribe. There were just four human figures walking in single file, dragging something that looked like a deer.

"The others must be close," said Ladda. "Maybe camped on the other side of that valley," she pointed to her right.

"Well, that's good news, isn't it?" the young one rejoiced greatly. They had finally found what they were looking for.

"I wouldn't be so thrilled," Kara intervened.

"Why not? Who would turn down these wonderful curves?" the young one ran a hand over her waist and grinned mischievously.

"Those aren't men, Thura," Kara affirmed sadly. "You can't expect anything from them."

"How can they not be men?" Ladda asked. "What are they then?"

"They're brutes."

Indeed, Kara was right. Those weren't men but an older hominid species that still inhabited the planet: Neanderthals.

"Brutes?"

"They're beasts, Ladda! Thura might not remember, since the last time we had contact with them was many seasons ago. They're savages who eat raw meat and respect no one, not even children."

"So, what do we do?" the young one asked.

"I didn't realize we had come so far north," Kara said, "or maybe they have come very far south this time. They usually live in icy areas and hunt mammoths."

"Hunting is scarce everywhere," Ladda added. "If they're so dangerous, it's best to stay here and wait for them to leave."

The other two nodded and continued observing "the brutes." There were three men and one woman, enormous, though it was hard to recognize the latter as female. Two men were blond, and the woman and the other man were red-haired. All four had very fair skin and blue eyes, though it was hard to recognize them under the tangle of hair that covered them below their shoulders.

The four climbed a slope near them, and all three women crouched behind some bushes, urging the children to do the same.

But they were discovered, nonetheless. One of the little ones spoke, drawing the attention of the mother, and the brutes stopped, looking in their direction.

"Run!" Kara shouted. "Run as fast as you can!"

The three women grabbed the children and began to descend the hill, while behind them, they heard the voices of the four Neanderthals who started to chase them. Though they were at a certain distance, they were no match for those burly and huge specimens, and they were soon captured.

Kara was the first to fall. One of her twins was the slowest runner and was soon caught. Ladda followed shortly after, receiving a blow to the legs from a club carried by one of the men. The blow was so strong it broke her bone, and she fell with intense pain. The rest of the children stayed around the mothers, and the chase ceased.

Thura's capture took a little longer, as she was the strongest and also didn't have any children with her. But she was captured nonetheless, a little further down by the Neanderthal woman, who grabbed the girl's hair tightly and brought her alongside the others.

Immediately, the men beat the women until they were unconscious, while they did the same with the children, to whom they showed no mercy whatsoever. They then proceeded to savagely rape the three women.

The brutes

The cold of the night woke her up. Every bone ached, and there was a strong stinging sensation in her pubic area and inside her vagina. She couldn't move. She was sitting with her back against a tree, hands tied behind her, and her whole body surrounded by ropes. Some ropes hurt so much that she could barely feel her arms from how tightly they were bound.

In front of her, about twenty or thirty paces away, the brutes were eating the deer they had dragged that day.

There was a fire, though it wasn't used for cooking. Thanks to that, she could see on the ground, lying scattered among the trees, the bodies of all the dead children and Ladda, undoubtedly also dead.

She started to cry silently. Her twins were there, forming an indistinct lump alongside the other children, her companions on that suicidal journey.

At that moment, she regretted convincing Ladda to leave those caves. Although, on the other hand, what else could they have done? Wasn't it better than staying there cowardly, waiting for a death that would undoubtedly come? At least they had tried, she told herself.

The physical and emotional pain was unbearable, and she feared going insane at that moment. But, being a born survivor, she gathered strength from weakness and didn't sink into despair. On the contrary, she tried to think of anything else and began to remember the past.

Of the eight children she had had in her long life —thirty-two years was quite an achievement in those times— she had seen them all die, the last three on that crazy adventure. Crazy? she asked herself again. Really, she had done nothing that any other sane person wouldn't have attempted. She comforted herself, thinking that she had done everything for her children, even if it had gone wrong.

When she devised the plan to kill Unnum, she did it for Umma, who, although not her blood daughter, she always considered as such. If Tabal hadn't insisted on escape with her, that chief would have been the only one dead from that whole adventure.

But how could she have known that? she thought. Looking back, it would have been better to let Umma die that night and thus save the whole tribe and the rest of her children. Ulla wasn't wrong, after all, when she decided that the girl had to be eliminated.

"What had become of her?" she wondered. It was highly improbable that those two had survived, although, who knows? That young woman's life had been a miracle from beginning to end, and destiny couldn't have reserved a death for her like the ones all the other women in the tribe had.

"Thura?" she said, softly. She thought she had heard a whimper behind the tree, and besides, the ropes holding her had stretched. Indeed, her companion was tied with her in that same spot. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I am now."

"What happened to you?"

"The brutes. They've torn me apart inside. I just had a miscarriage, or something like that."

"But, were you pregnant?"

"It's possible."

"Unnum's?"

"Yes, probably. The strange thing is that now the ground is dry, Kara."

"Right, right."

"I might have imagined it, but I felt it in such a... real way."

"You didn't imagine it, Thura. I experienced the same thing the night Umma left with Tabal. I even saw the puddle of blood, and a moment later, it was gone."

The young woman sighed and started to cry. Then she said, between sobs, "I think I have a broken arm, and besides, my pubic area is burning. I don't know if it's because of the miscarriage..."

"No, it's not because of that. I feel it too. These brutes must have something that they've infected us with when they raped us."

Kara started crying too, and the two remained like that for a while. Then, Thura calmed down a bit and asked, "Where is Ladda? And the children?"

"All dead," she managed to say between sighs, her voice breaking. "You and I are the only ones left."

"I never imagined that men could be worse than beasts," she said after a while.

"They are not men. The brutes have always been like that, Thura. They're untamed beings, though fortunately, there are fewer and fewer of them."

"Fewer? How is that possible, such aggressive people?"

"They can only hunt large prey that runs little. Their hunting strategy is based on strength, and they're not skilled with spears. They only kill at close range, stabbing directly into the animals."

"They run little?"

"Yes. Although they captured us easily, these beings can't endure long runs like men of our species do. They tire quickly."

"But then, how did they capture that deer?"

"I don't know. Perhaps they found it dead, or..."

"Or they took it from other men."

Thura had hit the nail on the head. Indeed, that's what had happened. The young woman was left speechless, as in front of her stood one of those men, a "sapiens" man, a man of the human species.

"Hush," the guy said, putting his index finger to his lips. "Don't scream. Tonight, we'll free you," he whispered, and then stealthily left.

"Thura? I thought I heard... Thura?"

"Yes, Kara, I'm still here."

"But..."

"He's gone now."

"Who's gone?"

"A man. A real one."

"What did he say to you?"

"I think he said they'll save us."

"Is that all?"

"Yes. It was a language like ours, from the north. From the Kuru people. A different dialect, but I managed to understand it."

Rescue

Ahizu wasn't going to let that deer be taken away just like that. He wasn't afraid of the brutes, as he had faced them before and with success.

The key was never to engage in hand-to-hand combat, as their strength and size would be insurmountable. Spears had to be used skilfully from a distance, as those creatures had no accuracy and would never hit him with theirs.

Moreover, that captive girl was beautiful. She was bruised and had blood on her face, but it was evident that she was young and eager to live. If he managed to save her, she would be his wife, and he would surely give her many children.

Like so many other times, he and his companion had tirelessly chased a deer until it surrendered, exhausted, after many hours of pursuit. It was when they were dragging it back to where the tribe had stayed that the brutes surprised them from behind. There was no choice but to flee, for if they hadn't, they would have been killed on the spot.

But he who laughs last laughs best, Ahizu thought, and while his companion recovered from the blows received, they planned to kill them later while they slept.

The problem was that that night there was no moon, and when the fire went out, nothing could be seen within that impenetrable forest.

"Maybe it's for the best, Ahizu," said Boran, his companion. "At dawn, they'll be ours. As soon as they come out of the trees, we'll hunt them down one by one."

The problem was that the brutes weren't willing to come out of the trees. The next morning, they had another piece of deer for breakfast, and they began to dissect one of the children, undoubtedly with the intention of eating it before it spoiled. They would probably keep the women alive for as long as possible, as there was no better way to preserve food than when it's alive. However, in the meantime, they would take advantage to systematically rape them until that moment arrived.

Kara and Thura had fallen asleep from sheer exhaustion, and the latter didn't wake up until Ahizu appeared again. The man had approached with extreme caution, making no noise, and proceeded to cut their ropes with a bone knife. After urging them again not to scream, he said:

"You can't escape now. The ground is covered in dry leaves, and you'll make a lot of noise. They'll notice and hunt you down."

"When then?" asked Thura, anxiously.

"I'll give the signal. One of you will run uphill, and the other to the left, towards that rock over there," he pointed. "I suppose they'll split into two groups, and my companion and I will be waiting for them behind the rocks."

"But... they'll kill you!" warned Kara.

"No, they won't," the young hunter smiled. "Before they realize it, they'll have a spear through them from end to end."

The two women got up slowly as soon as they heard a whistling sound that simulated the oriole’s song. That meant the men were already stationed in the indicated spot. They were stiff, and it took a while for the blood to flow through all their limbs again.

The brutes had finished eating and were now drinking water from a small container, which, when Kara looked at it again, turned out to be the severed skull of a human child. If her stomach hadn't been empty, she would have vomited everything she had inside right there.

"Now!" the woman shouted, and Thura moved uphill, running at full speed. Her target was the farthest one, and that's why she, being younger and theoretically faster, chose that spot. It was feasible to reach it before the brutes caught her. Kara, for her part, headed towards the rocks on the left, on a slightly shorter path.

As they had supposed, two men went after Thura, while the other man and the woman headed towards Kara.

The first one managed to reach the rock, and as she passed it, Boran rose above it and threw his spear forcefully at the first brute as soon as he had turned his back. The weapon hit exactly where he intended, and that blond creature fell, pierced through the kidneys. The other one stopped and looked up but suffered the same fate. The hunter threw a second spear at him, which also hit the mark, although it missed slightly and only pierced his thigh.

Meanwhile, Kara didn't manage to reach the indicated spot. The long time she had spent tied to that tree took its toll, and as soon as she left, she pulled a muscle in her right calf that prevented her from running. She tried to get there as best she could, limping, but the brute chasing her threw a stone that hit her head and made her collapse on the ground, where she lay as if dead. The Neanderthals didn't have such bad aim after all.

But that messed up the plans, and Ahizu had to bail out of his hiding spot earlier than expected. Even though Kara and her pursuers were a bit away, the hunter didn't wait for them to close in; he chucked one of his spears, luckily hitting his mark. The red-haired guy went down, skewered by the sharp weapon, but the woman managed to slip away. Instead of legging it like she should've, she circled back and caught Ahizu off guard, and they got into a scrap. The guy had a rough time of it, though. The woman was taller and stronger, landing him a barrage of blows that almost knocked him out cold more than once. But his agility helped him dodge a bunch, though one of her kicks put him flat on the ground.

Meanwhile, Boran had his hands full dealing with the other brute, who yanked the spear out of his thigh and was now threatening him with it. Couldn't run, but Boran started pelting him with stones, one after the other. The barrage did the trick, leaving the other blondie dazed. That's when Boran circled around until the guy got dizzy and lost track of him. That's when Boran struck from behind, shoving a knife into his kidney, coming out the other side. The brute dropped dead not far from the other one.

Over in the other part of the fight, things weren't going well. The Neanderthal woman had Ahizu pinned down, choking him out, and he couldn't do a anything about it.

But his salvation came thanks to Thura. While Boran dealt with the injured brute, she saw Ahizu was in deep trouble and made her way over. When she got there, she grabbed a rock off the ground, and just as Ahizu was about to die, she leaped on the woman and clocked her hard on the temple. The redhead let go of Ahizu's throat, and he seized the opportunity to break free and grab a knife from his pack. He stabbed the woman in the belly, and she fell back, eyes rolling back.

That's when Boran showed up, and the two guys hugged it out.

"Where's Kara?" the girl asked.

"One of the brutes beaned her with a rock," Boran answered. "I reckon she's dead."

They all headed over and found her lying face down on the ground. They flipped her over, and she started gasping, opening her eyes.

"Get some water!" Thura ordered.

Boran headed to a nearby stream and stripped off one of his skins, filling it with water to make a makeshift pouch. When he got back to where the others were, Kara was sitting up, and with everyone's help, they managed to get her to drink some of the liquid. That perked her up, and she started coughing, finally regaining full consciousness.

"How you feeling?" Boran asked.

"Alright," she replied. "But my head's killing me."

"You've got a nasty gash," the girl informed her. "But you'll pull through."

"What happened to the brutes?" Kara asked.

"All dead," Ahizu replied. "You're safe now."

"Got any food?"

"Nope. But we'll eat what's left of our deer."

"They stole it from you, huh?"

Both nodded, and one asked, "What about you? I'm Boran, and this here's Ahizu."

"I'm Thura, and she's Kara. We really appreciate what you've done for us."

"We're just glad you're alright," Boran said. "How did they find you? Are those your kids?" He gestured to the children still on the ground. "And where are your men?"

"Yeah, those are our kids," Kara answered. "And our men... well, it's a long story. If you don't mind, we'd prefer to eat first."

"Of course," Ahizu replied. "Come with us."

He grabbed Thura's arm to help her up, but she let out a cry of pain.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"My arm. I think it's broken. Those animals broke it yesterday."

"Oh, don't worry. When we meet up with our tribe, our healer will fix you up. She's good at splinting broken bones. Done it plenty of times."

Next, they roasted what was left of the deer and replenished their strength. Things didn't seem so bad after all. After so many days, at least two people had survived, though all the children had perished. That was a pain Kara carried deep inside, though she held onto hope of bearing more in the future.

They'd been through tough times. Really tough. But to varying degrees, that woman had experienced similar situations before. That was life in that remote and wild past. Kara faced life as a rollercoaster of bad moments and good ones, of hunger and need, of tiredness and exhaustion, with others where life was bearable and sometimes, just sometimes, wonderful, though always admirable. The present was a sigh, and the future didn't exist. The sun that rose today could be the last, and anything was possible in life's odyssey.

Destiny

Before heading off to where they were awaited, the two women washed their pubis in the cold stream running down the slope. The itching and stinging had become unbearable, and this provided some relief.

The tribe to which their rescuers belonged wasn't much larger than the one they came from. In fact, it had a significant deficit of women, as the majority had died in childbirth or due to the cold. Many millennia still lay ahead before the permanent ice retreated and the ice age ended, revealing countless lands that had been under snow until then.

Most of humanity lived there, in that narrow strip between icy and desert climates, struggling to find their place in the adventure of life.

Ahizu turned out to be quite a gentleman, and Boran, his companion, was no less so. Both took a keen interest in the rescued women, and in time, took them as wives.

But their happiness didn't last long. The fate of Unnum's lineage was marked with the sign of destruction and doomed to disaster. In the case of those survivors, gonorrhoea, a disease to which the brutes were immune, ultimately claimed them and much of their new tribe.

Only one pair of young people, an exceptional couple if there ever was one, seemed to escape that cruel fate momentarily

The escape

“Stop, Tabal! Stop!”

As soon as they exited the cave, they started running like crazy, and for good reason. Tabal thought Ator would come out right after them, and they needed to take as much distance as possible. He was on guard, frequently looking back, knowing that sooner or later he would have to engage in a fight, this time to the death.

Fortunately, the pursuit didn’t happen immediately, allowing them to gain some advantage, but they had been running for a long time, and Umma was completely exhausted. The girl stopped and bent forward, placing her hands on her knees as she tried to catch her breath. For a girl like her, with such large breasts, running was a rather ungrateful task.

“We can’t stop. We have to keep going!” he urged. “We need to gain ground before they come after us! Let’s go!”

“I can’t, Tabal. Let me rest at least for a while!”

The young man looked at his companion. Her chest rose and fell spasmodically, and her face showed great agitation. Since they fled the cave, Tabal had maintained a ‘gentle’ pace, knowing that females don’t endure the run well. But they couldn’t stop for long. At least, not yet. While Umma recovered, he glanced around. The full moon flooded the vastness of the horizon with silver light, and he could see mountains in the distance that they had to reach before sunrise. There, they would hide and spend the day in concealment, watching to ensure they weren’t overtaken.

“They’ll catch us, Tabal. They are expert runners!”

“So am I!”

“But I’m not!” she replied. “And you’ll have to keep my pace! We should have stayed there!”

“Do you want to die tomorrow?” he growled.

“I’m not going to die. I already told you!”

“Nonsense! Ulla is ruthless and thirsty for blood. Your death is certain! Don’t you understand?”

In truth, Tabal was not entirely wrong. Apart from superstition, the sorceress decided to kill her upon contemplating the girl’s beauty. The peculiarity of those large breasts would have driven men mad, causing them to fight over her. Her very existence was a source of discord and would surely lead to disputes among them, as had already happened. The cunning old woman knew what she was doing: Umma was dangerous to maintaining the tribe’s integrity, and everyone’s survival was at risk.

“Or maybe you wanna be Ator’s wife?” he added.

The girl shook her head fiercely, and Tabal replied, “I wouldn’t consent it either. So, let’s go, quick.”

“Where are we going?” she asked, somewhat recovered.

“To the north.”

“What do you expect to find there?”

“I don’t know. We’ve never gone this far. But animals go that way, and we have to follow them if we want to eat. For now, we have to reach those mountains,” he pointed out, “if we don’t want to get caught this very night. My footprints are hard to follow, but not yours.”

“I don’t understand why they haven’t caught up with us already.”

“Because they haven’t come after us yet. Ator may have tried, but the men must have refused. Sabre-toothed tigers see in the dark and are dangerous.”

“Why hasn’t he come out alone?”

“He has a concussion. I’ve seen those blows from animals many times. If he hasn’t come out already, he’ll be like that all night. We have to reach those mountains before dawn!” he urged again. “With some luck, our tracks will be lost on the bare rock, and from there, we can go in any direction.”

Umma resigned herself, and they started running again, stopping at increasingly shorter intervals, much to Tabal’s despair. Finally, they encountered no tigers, and the sun was already on the horizon when they reached the mountains. They took refuge in a crevice among the rocks, which the boy covered with dry branches. It was a suitable vantage point to spot their pursuers, with enough concealment to move elsewhere if needed. But he wasn’t entirely confident. He began to consider that they had made a mistake, and the tribe’s men would scatter in the area once their tracks were lost. Surely, they would find him, and he would have to kill some of his comrades, or they might kill him first and take the girl, who was a thoroughly exhausted burden by now.

Umma had fallen asleep as soon as she lay down, and he let her rest while deciding on his next steps. After a while, he woke her up and said, “Come on, we need to keep going.”

“Where to?”

“For now, upwards. We have no water, and we won’t find any on the plain. I hope to find some leftover snow at the summit. Come on, we’ll go slow.”

A few hours later, Ator and four more men had reached the base of the mountains. Since the tracks were lost, they spread out in the area and planned to meet at noon at the base camp. Ulla arrived at that moment with the two last men, and the chief briefed her, “They must be around here, resting. That woman must be exhausted, and they have no water.”

“We’ll climb to the top,” said the old woman. “We’ll catch them there.”

However, the summit was not a singular place but rather a collection of scattered peaks. The eight tribe members split into pairs and began tracking, with the sorceress staying with Ator.

Meanwhile, well into the afternoon, the fugitives had loaded several dove-skin water pouches with melted snow and tied them to their waists with wicker straps. In the distance, they had already seen two of their pursuers and stopped to decide what to do.

“I need to rest, Tabal, and so do you. We should stay here for the night.”

“Then we’ll be dead, Umma. If they do the same, they’ll catch up in the morning. We can’t always stay in these mountains to hide our tracks. There’s no food here, and on the plain...”

“Yes, I know. But they’ll catch us sooner or later if we keep heading north. They’ll do the same.”

Tabal closed his eyes and clenched his fists. She was right. The cold was intense, despite being wrapped in deer hides. They needed to get out of there as soon as possible, but in any case, that would only delay their capture. Umma sensed his desperation and, far from reproaching, said gently while caressing him, “Come on, Tabal. You’re not giving up now...”

He smiled, and they embraced, their faces close to kissing, until they heard a noise to their right. About a hundred steps away stood a sabre-toothed tiger staring at them. Its illuminated pupils fixed on the two figures, freezing them in terror. The animal roared, and a pair of hand-sized sharp knives glinted in the moonlight. The young ones turned around and started running downhill, but Umma slipped and began rolling down the slope covered with dry moss, barely cushioning the blows. Tabal still maintained his balance, but the tiger was getting closer. Finally, in the nick of time, the girl entered a narrow crevice between two rocks, and he did the same, taking refuge beside her.

Both lay on the ground, but the animal’s paw reached their clothes and got caught in the seams of the deer hides. Then Tabal tried to use his spear, which was under him, but the manoeuvre only resulted in a deep scratch on his side that made him scream in pain. Umma was practically trapped underneath and could hardly move, except sideways. Then, with her free hand, she untied her loincloth and waved it at the tiger to distract it. At that moment, Tabal seized the opportunity to finally grab the spear and thrust it forcefully into the animal’s leg. It roared loudly and withdrew slightly from the crevice entrance. However, hunger prevailed over pain, and it attempted again with its claws. It was a bad idea. Another thrust forced it to retract its paw, and the animal understood that it wouldn’t gain anything from these preys.

“Are you okay, Tabal?”

“It stings a lot...”

Umma turned to the right, trying to look diagonally, and that’s when she saw the tiger leaving. Then she stood up, took one of her dove-skin water pouches, and tried to clean the wound on her companion’s side.

“We shouldn’t waste water,” he interjected.

“It’s my water, and I’ll do with it what I want,” she looked towards the moon, now shining brightly on the horizon. “Besides, by this hour, I should already be dead, so, as I told you, I’ve triumphed over death.”

Tabal smiled and stepped away from her to look as well. Then he said:

“The tiger has gone, but it won’t be far. We should stay here to rest until dawn. After that, I’m afraid I’ll have to fight it.”

“Fight the tiger?”

“Yes,” he affirmed, with seriousness. “It knows we’re here, and it will wait for us.”

“But can you do it? What about your wound?”

“The wound isn’t deep. It will heal. Tomorrow in the fray, I won’t feel it.”

“But…

“I’d rather fight it than face Ator. The beast will most likely kill me, but at least you can escape while it devours me.”

“Oh, Tabal! Don’t say that!”

“Women aren’t used to seeing these things, but I once witnessed a fight with three men wielding spears against one of these tigers, and it killed them all. I don’t think I stand a chance,” he concluded. “But for now, let’s sleep.”

The tiger

Being so close, they didn't feel the cold, and despite the uncomfortable position, they didn't wake up until well into the day. They had stayed embraced throughout the night until he slightly raised himself, sticking his head out from one of the rocks that formed their shelter.

"It must be nearby. I have to go out."

"No, Tabal, I don't want to see you die..."

"If we stay here, we'll die anyway," he assured, getting up. But she grabbed his hand, pulling him towards her to give him a kiss. He smiled and went outside.

The slope they were on consisted of granite stones with scattered pine trees, not enough for hiding from the tiger or the tribe's men. He crouched down, preparing to crawl to explore the terrain, but it was already too late. They had spotted him as soon as he peeked his head out.

"Alu, Alu!" one of the men shouted. "They're here!"

Less than two hundred steps above them was Shacat, signalling to his companion about their location. Being a skilled tracker, he didn't make the mistake of turning his head towards Alu when he called, so Tabal couldn't pinpoint where he was.

Immediately, he pulled Umma out of the shelter and grabbed her hand, preparing to flee down the easiest path, the one most suitable for the girl. But she couldn't run too much because the bruises she had suffered the day before, rolling down the slope, hurt her. So, she said, "Save yourself, Tabal! Don't follow me!"

"I'll never leave you! Come on!"

But the escape didn't last long. About forty steps away, Alu emerged over a rise, and Shacat was already a similar distance behind them. Then, they started climbing again, knowing they would be caught immediately. The boy's hope was to reach some rocks higher up, always at a greater distance from the spear's throw, where he could take cover and attempt to fight hand-to-hand from an elevated position.

They were about to achieve it when a spear struck the ground just a few inches behind them. Their pursuers were too close, and Tabal threw one of his spears at them, but it didn't reach any. Capture was imminent, and the two warriors continued ascending to catch them when the miracle happened: the sabre-toothed tiger emerged over the rock and pounced on the two men, crushing Alu to death. Shacat had a bit more reflexes and managed to thrust a spear into the animal's side, but not with enough force to prevent the tiger from subsequently lunging at him, piercing his neck with one of its sabres.

Umma and Tabal were crouched under the rock, watching the scene with wide eyes. Soon, the boy realized that the tiger hadn't attacked them, despite being closer, because they were hidden under the same stone it had pounced on.

Either way, the two were still alive, although their hearts were racing despite being paralysed by fear. The hungry tiger was now devouring Shacat's abdomen with great voracity, and they took advantage of the stealth to try to escape. Slowly, they moved to the side until they lost sight of the tiger behind a ridge, and then they ran at full speed.

Umma no longer felt the bruises and ran almost as fast as her companion until they reached a small valley between the mountains, where they stopped, completely exhausted.

“What are we going to do now?” the girl asked, panting.

Tabal caught his breath and looked around. After a moment, he said, “If they see us moving along the slope, they can spot us from afar. We have to hide. It’s less likely they’ll see us if we stay still. The range is vast, and with a bit of luck, they won’t find us. Especially now that they’ve lost two; two less to spread out and search.”

“How long do we have to stay hidden?”

“Until nightfall. Then they’ll sleep. We’ll stop until then... next to those rocks,” he pointed to his right. “The moon will take a while to rise, and we’ll march in the darkness.”

“Where to? North?”

He nodded.

“But they’ll go there!” Umma warned, stating the obvious. “What’s the use of taking another advantage if, in a day or two, they’ll be upon us?”

Tabal turned his head and looked towards the horizon. The girl was right. Then he seemed to consider something, and that’s when he decided:

“Well then, we’ll go east.”

“East?”

“Yes.”

“What’s in the east?”

“The desert.”

“The desert?”

“Yes. They won’t follow us there. No one in their right mind would dare to go to that place.”

“Oh! And what about us? Are we crazy or what?”

Tabal smiled and looked at her tenderly:

“You’re immortal, aren’t you? I hope, if I am with you, to become one too.”

The desert

With the last light of the day, they filled their pigeon pouches with enough water from some snow wells untouched by the sun. Until the moon came out, they walked light up only by the stars and descended the mountain, almost groping, until they could see enough to quicken their pace.

When day broke, they gathered some berries, the last ones they could find before reaching the dreaded desert and slept in the shade under a rocky slope with the intention of setting out again at night.

They were exhausted. So much so that the night caught them sleeping.

When they woke up, the world was still immersed in deep and quiet darkness, in profound silence, while the sky remained covered by a blanket of stars shining brightly in the infinite blackness.

It was time to march, and the two embraced and kissed to encourage each other on the long journey that awaited them through the unknown.

It was much later, as they walked towards the deep purple that indicates the cardinal point where the sun rises, that the darkness of the night began to give way to the first rays of dawn. At that moment, delicate and faint colours started to illuminate the horizon, creating a spectacle of lights and shadows on the sand dunes.

As they advanced, the gentle whistle of the wind weaving through the undulating contours of the dunes could be felt, while their shadows became more defined as the light gradually increased, revealing their soft texture. The same shadows projected behind them as they moved forward.

They had covered quite a bit of ground when the sun imposed its tyranny of heat over their heads. The sun now hung over them like a relentless oven, causing their throats to dry up and their lips to crack. The merciless rays filtered through the mountains and dunes, illuminating the landscape with an intense, almost white light that slowly made the shadows fade away, revealing a range of intense hues. Every grain of sand seemed to shine with its own light, creating a dazzling and desolate effect.

It made no sense to keep moving, and they stopped to rest and drink the last drops of water they had. They found a small, rocky outcrop and rested on a promontory where the sun didn't reach.

But then, disaster struck. Tabal had not finished inspecting the place when suddenly he felt a sharp, stabbing pain above his ankle. A snake had just bitten him, and after screaming in agony, the young man instinctively hit it with the blunt end of his spear, and it quickly retreated as he fell to the ground.

But Umma didn't waste time. Even with eyes filled with terror, she hurried and with trembling hands, untied the cord holding the pigeon pouches to her waist and tightly tied the wounded leg to stop the advance of venom. Her eyes reflected determination as she looked at Tabal. "You're going to be okay," she murmured, although concern and fear echoed in her voice. Then she grabbed him and dragged him into the shade, seeking refuge. Tabal was panting; the snake's venom was already taking effect, with his skin reddening and his heart beating uncontrollably.

The girl winced in pain as she struggled to stay strong. Tabal kept his eyes tightly closed, while his forehead beaded with sweat. Umma poured the last drops of water she had on his lips, and he seemed to be slightly comforted. She spoke to him gently, trying to keep him awake and comforting him with words of encouragement... But Tabal was slipping away. He had seen the bites of those snakes many times, and the victims took only a few minutes to die.

Then she resorted to the only thing left to do, and said, loudly and looking at the sky:

“Oh, my God! You, the only and highest Lord! I invoke you! Save Tabal! Save him!” she exclaimed, with a torn and deep voice, full of emotion, and then she burst into tears on the chest of her beloved.

Tears flowed endlessly from her large, slanted eyes as the boy felt worse and worse. Umma poured herself out over him, incessantly pleading for the favour of the One who was her only hope...

And her prayers were not long in being answered. Before long, those mighty lightning bolts they had seen in the days before appeared again, striking the nearby land. Umma was frightened, but deep down, she knew that it was nothing but a sign from the Most High, a comforting sign that this god, the only God, was on her side.

Tabal stopped trembling, the fever subsided, and the sweat slowly disappeared. He looked into the eyes of his beloved and weakly smiled, silently thanking her for her courage and care. Then, he sank into a deep sleep, his face showing relative calm.

“Sleep, my love! Sleep!” she whispered, lying down beside him, and embracing him gently.

Hours passed under the desert rocks, with the heat of the day gradually giving way to the setting sun. Umma didn’t move from his side, holding Tabal and consoling him every time he woke up.

The night finally enveloped the desert, bringing with it a cool breeze and a starry sky. Although the danger had passed, Umma and Tabal remained together under the rocks, sharing the warmth of their mutual support in the vastness of the desert.

The desert, a silent witness to their survival ordeal, seemed to whisper stories of resilience and bravery as the couple prepared to face the new day, which surely would be laden with dangers too.

And these did not take long to arrive. As the hours passed and the day arrived, Tabal was practically recovered, just limping slightly. But that wasn't much of a problem. It simply made their steps synchronised without him having to slow down. Both were now on equal footing.

The problem was that they had run out of water, and it had been days since they had tasted any food. To make matters worse, as they advanced eastward, a massive sandstorm descended upon them. In the middle of nowhere, the wind blew forcefully as small pebbles hit their faces and stung their skin. Ungrateful dust grains and prickly sand particles harassed and pricked them like tiny thorn needles dancing in the dry air. Progress became impossible, and they stopped to take shelter behind some rocks until the wind subsided.

But it took a while for the wind to calm, and the couple became desperate.

"Oh, Tabal! We will die!" cried Umma.

"We won't die! You can't die!" The hero tried to instil hope. "And if I do, the last days of my life will have been worthwhile. Being by your side has been the best thing that has happened to me, and for that alone, I will happily die."

They embraced and kissed, and after doing so, the wind began to relent. Gradually, the sand grains that danced in the air, forming fierce whirlwinds, settled on the ground, and then came the rain.

Yes. The rains finally arrived. For two days and nights, it rained heavily, and the fugitives were able to drink water from the natural bowls that filled the crevices of the rocks, while small ponds formed in some gullies.

Two days of momentary relief, in which at least the threat of death by dehydration drifted away.

On the third day, the sun came out, and the couple, very weakened but comforted by the water, continued to advance. There was no choice but to move forward because not doing so meant death.

In the vast expanses of an endless desert, where the dunes stretched like frozen waves and the sun painted the sky with burning orange, two young souls fought to survive.

Their journey began as a bold adventure, but soon turned into a desperate struggle to find water and food in a desolate landscape. The clouds were left behind and did not reappear.

Water and food... The water ran out, and for days, all they did was squeeze the bottom of their pigeon pouches to extract the last traces of moisture. And food... They couldn't even remember the last time they had put anything in their mouths other than each other's kisses.

They walked with tired steps, their bare feet touching the hot sand, and their faces marked by dust and sun.

Umma fell on the sand, defeated, and Tabal tried to lift her, something he only managed to do after great efforts.

They continued walking, with him looking ahead as his beloved could barely do so. She simply dragged herself with erratic steps, supported by Tabal's strong arms.

Finally, they reached a hill, which at first seemed just like one of the many they had climbed and descended during their journey. But from there, they saw something that seemed too good to be true: a glimmer of green in the distance.

Could it be a mirage? Tabal made Umma look in that direction to see if she saw the same thing, and her squinted eyes suddenly widened.

"An oasis!" they both shouted.

With renewed strength, they ran towards it, leaving behind fatigue and despair. That green spot was far away, but joy was the engine that moved their legs, and they soon reached it.

When they arrived, they found themselves before a dazzling oasis with palm trees swaying gently in the breeze, a pond of crystal-clear water, and ripe fruits hanging from the branches. They knelt by the water and drank eagerly, letting tears of relief mix with the coolness of the life-giving liquid.

The ground was covered with brightly coloured flowers, and the air was infused with the sweet aroma of nature. A gentle breeze moved the tree leaves, creating a tranquil and serene symphony. They ventured into the oasis, letting the soft grass caress their bare feet and discovering lush fruit trees laden with delicious and juicy fruits whose branches bent under the weight of apples, oranges, mangoes, and other exotic delights.

Bliss flooded their hearts as they devoured those delicacies, feeling the energy and life returning to their bodies. At that moment, they looked at each other, sharing a deep connection that only those who have suffered together can understand. In their gaze, there was gratitude, love, and the promise that, from that day forward, they would be a beacon of hope for each other amid life's challenges.

Having overcome countless challenges and walked through the scorching desert, Umma and Tabal found themselves in front of an unexpected paradise. Before them stretched a fertile and lush oasis in the midst of the vast and arid wasteland.

They realized that they had found more than just water and food; they had discovered a home, a refuge amid the unforgiving nature, a paradise, an Eden.

And they wasted no time. After eating and satisfying their hunger, they both undressed and bathed, laughed and played, and when they emerged from the water, they caressed each other, kissed, and made love.

It seemed as if all the sorrows, all the hardships, fear, pain, hunger, and thirst had been nothing more than a nightmare in the middle of the night, a momentary unease that had transformed into joy and love. Umma and Tabal savoured each other...

Until a spear impaled just inches from their naked bodies.

Ator, had found them.

Of the eight men who initiated the pursuit, two were devoured by the sabre-toothed tiger, and another two perished in the mountains, attacked by a bear.

When their trail was lost in the mountains, the one-eyed man wanted to head north, as originally planned, since that was the predictable path Tabal would take. But the sorceress had a vision: the gods, or rather, the Demon, communicated that they had to march east, and she conveyed this to Ator. He hesitated, but ever since the old woman discovered that well in the middle of nowhere the day they killed the aurochs, he blindly trusted her judgment.

However, the other two men were not as agreeable to traveling to the desert, and they protested vehemently. Nevertheless, they obeyed but soon met their demise. One fell off a cliff, and the other was bitten by the same snake that bit Tabal, dying immediately.

Only two remained in this capture expedition, the two most wicked: Ulla and Ator, blinded by hatred, they did not waver in their determination to capture the young couple and put them to death. Driven by the devil himself, they endured the cold, the heat, hunger, and thirst in a fierce pursuit that had finally borne fruit.

Tabal had left his weapons at the entrance of the oasis and was defenceless against Ator's attack. He tried to pick up the spear that had lodged next to him, but the impact on the ground had been tremendous, and the tip had shattered. Umma sought refuge behind him, and the poor girl began to tremble with fear, her heart pounding rapidly.

Meanwhile, Ulla laughed heartily, with an evil laughter, as if the devil himself were laughing inside her. The two approached the couple, and Ator raised another spear to strike the boy. Tabal considered himself dead, as at that distance, the one-eyed man could not miss. He thought about fleeing, but that would expose the girl, and really he was ready to die before she did.

Ator smiled, and when he was about to throw...

He couldn't complete the hit. A bolt from the sky struck directly onto the spear, reducing it to ashes and also striking him. An instant later, another lightning bolt did the same to Ulla, and the two turned into black scum that was immediately swallowed by the earth.

Tabal and Umma looked at each other, not quite understanding what had happened. After the lightning that struck down their enemies, a gentle wind began to blow from the centre of paradise, and behind a leafy tree appeared a figure. It was a radiant man who filled them with terror.

Umma remained protected behind the boy, and he once again missed his weapons. The newcomer read his thoughts and said:

"Do not fear, Tabal, for you have found favour with God."

At that moment, the two calmed down, and the boy asked:

"Who are you? Are you Baloc?"

“My name is Gabriel, and I am the messenger of the Most High God, the only one that exists.”

The young ones were perplexed, and great peace flooded their spirits. Gabriel continued:

“The Lord has seen the goodness in your hearts and has chosen you to form a great family. Tabal, from now on, you shall be called Adam, and your wife shall be called Eve, and you shall be the parents of all the living. You will dwell in this paradise, and all of this will be yours and your descendants’, living eternally and in fullness.”

“Is all this for us?” asked Eve, looking around.

“The Lord has brought you to this garden for you to enjoy and possess it entirely. There is only one condition: in this place that has been trodden by the Devil,” Gabriel pointed to the spot where their enemies had been struck down a moment ago, “a tree will grow from whose fruits you shall not eat. You may taste all the fruits of this garden, except the fruits of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Only to God will you worship and only to Him will you serve, as the angels in Heaven have been doing for eternity. That is where you are destined to live eternally and in fullness when your life on Earth comes to an end.”

Adam and Eve turned around, hand in hand, and looked again at the inheritance that had fallen to them. As far as the eye could see, there was nothing else but palm trees and trees laden with fruits, while numerous streams of crystal-clear water enlivened the lush grass and flowed into tranquil lagoons that dotted the multi-coloured orchard.

They embraced and kissed, and then turned towards Gabriel, who nodded with a smile.

Next, the couple knelt, and both bowed their heads.

“Behold the servants of the Lord,” said Adam. “Let it be done according to His will.”

“So be it,” confirmed Eve.

The angel blessed the two with his right hand and then departed. Meanwhile, the cursed tree began to sprout from the earth.

Postface

As you all know, our protagonists disobeyed God, and deceived by the Devil, they desired to be equal to the One who gave them life. Consequently, they were expelled from Paradise and forced to return to the world from which they came. There, their descendants mingled with the descendants of other tribes east of Eden, and their progeny became numerous. Eventually, there was no one on Earth who could not trace their origins back to the first couple chosen by God.

Despite everything, despite returning to a state of need, He did not retract His promises, and although deprived of earthly pleasure, the lineage of Tabal and Umma remained immortal and destined for even greater joy in another Paradise beyond Earth.

But that's another story. The most wonderful story ever told, starring the very Son of God. A story that is written in a very famous book that you probably have in your home. Read it, and it will change your life.

Author's note

This story was originally published as part of a novel called "When Women Rule the World". If you enjoyed reading it, you can complete the story and put it in context by downloading that one.

You can obtain it in the same site where you have obtained this one, or in the following links:

https://archive.org/details/when-women-rule-the-world

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